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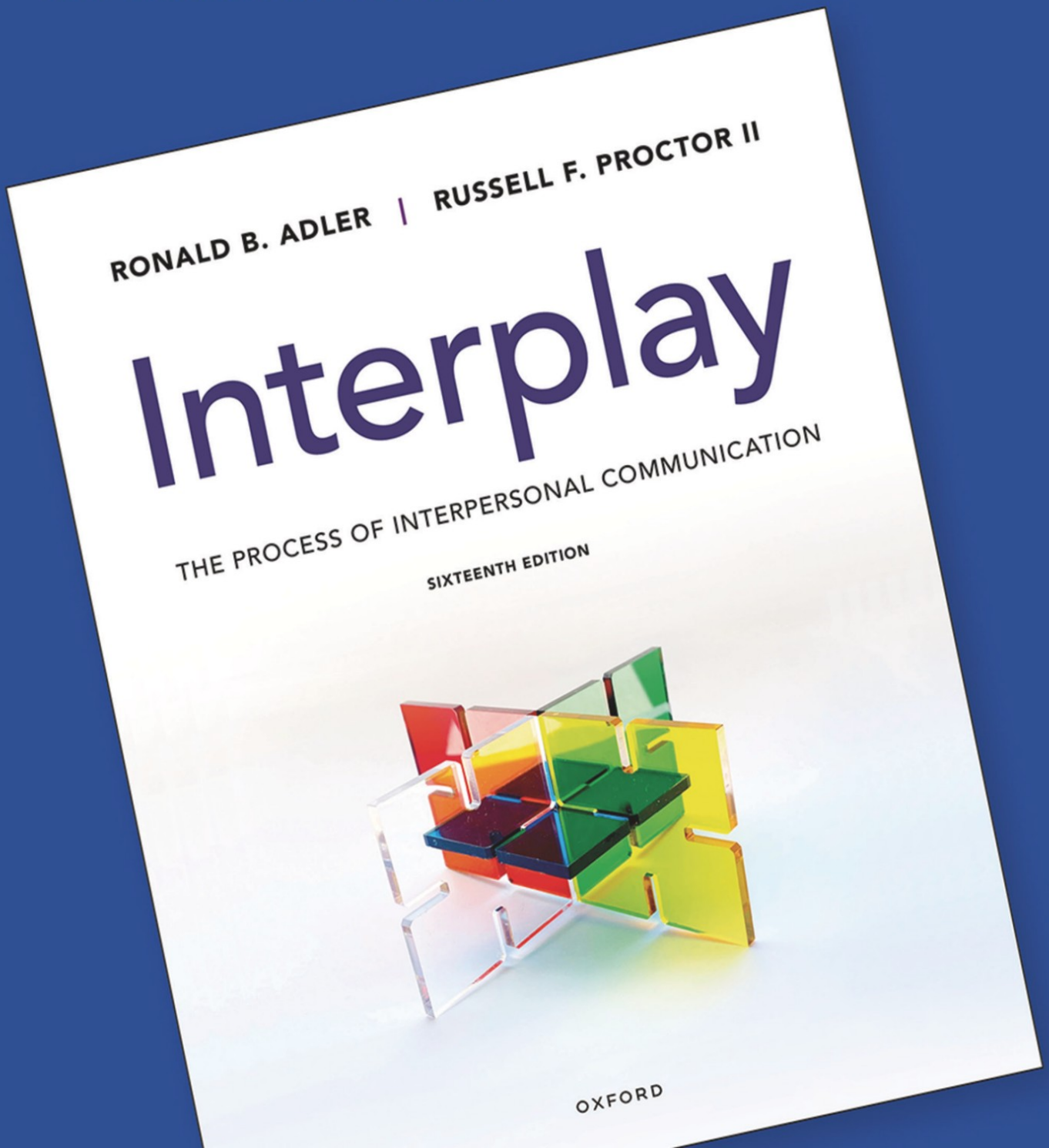

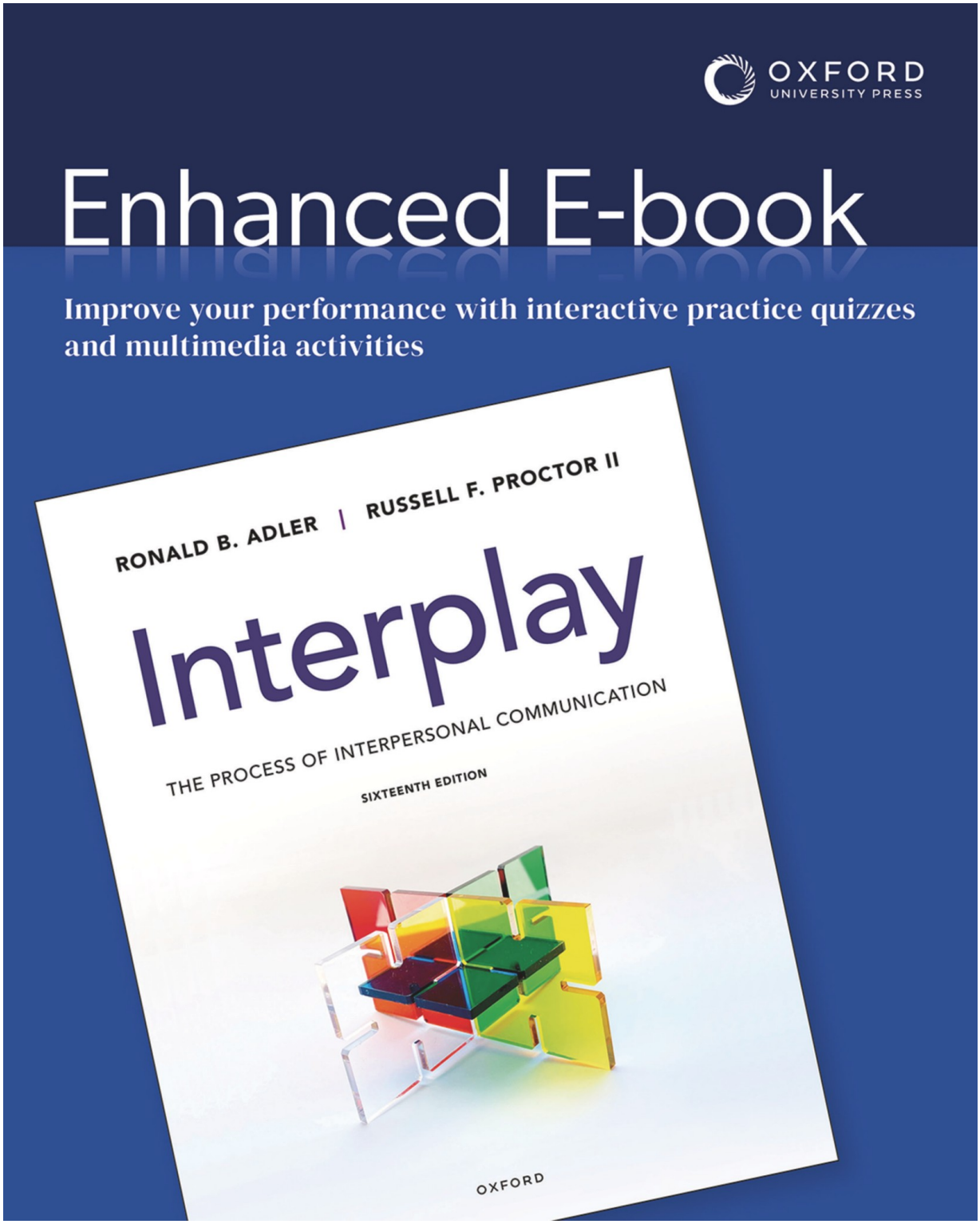

This image shows the cover of Interplay

Interplay

The Process of Interpersonal Communication

Sixteenth Edition

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

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Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

The nature of interpersonal communication has changed dramatically in recent years. Technology has transformed how many personal relationships evolve and operate. The COVID-19 pandemic affected how we connect and interact in ways no one could have anticipated. Cultural trends and gender identity have become increasingly prominent.

This new edition of *Interplay* reflects communication as it operates in today's world. At the same time, it emphasizes enduring principles and skills that are as important now as ever. It builds on the approach that has served students and professors well over four decades. Its accessible writing style presents concepts in a straightforward way. Thought-provoking features highlight their relevance. A host of skills give students tools for improving their own

interpersonal communication. Research and theory aren't presented for their own sake, but rather to explain how the process of interpersonal communication operates in everyday life. Material is grounded in scholarship: *Interplay* cites more than 1,500 sources, nearly a third of which are new to this edition. These citations have a strong communication focus, as we continue to spotlight scholarship from our field.

New in This Edition

For long-time users, a quick scan of this edition will reveal some significant changes:

Enhanced photo program Dozens of fresh pop culture and evocative photos illustrate principles in the text. Movies featured in captioned photos include *The Hate U Give*, *Can You Keep a Secret?*, *The King of Staten Island*, *No Way Home*, *Moxie*, *Free Guy*, and *CODA*. Series include *We Are Lady Parts*, *Squid Game*, *The Afterparty*, *Abbott Elementary*, *The Dropout*, *Ozark*, *In Treatment*, *Ted Lasso*, *Emily in Paris*, *Succession*, and *Inventing Anna*. Featured pop culture figures include NFL receiver A.J. Brown, musical artist Billie Eilish, actor Asia Kate Dillon, skier Lindsey Vonn, and tennis star Naomi Osaka.

New sidebars and features There are more than a dozen new *Focus on Research*, *At Work*, and *Dark Side of Communication*

sidebars in this edition. These describe studies about maintaining long-distance romances through texting, using one's voice to confront racism, the choice to reveal or conceal tattoos, the value of online profiles for first dates, the benefits of expressing affection, the pros and cons of working from home, communicating professionally via video, and how too much positive communication can become toxic. There are also six new *Watch and Discuss* video features in this edition illustrating the damaging effects of enhancing beauty online, invading personal space in public, and the disconfirming impact of "phubbing."

Revised and expanded sections include enhanced coverage of gender identity in Chapter 3; a new introduction to Chapter 6 (based on the powerful story of a college valedictorian with nonspeaking autism); new material and research on why we form relationships in Chapter 10; a new table elaborating Knapp's relational stages in Chapter 10; a more inclusive rendering of friendship, gender, and communication in Chapter 11; a new section on fostering intimacy in Chapter 11; and an expanded section on civil dialogue in Chapter 13. There are also more than 450 new research citations in this edition, with up-to-date scholarship embedded throughout every chapter.

Activities Every chapter in this edition of *Interplay* ends with four new activities: *Build Your Skill*, *Ethical Challenge*, *Reflection*, and *Self-Appraisal*. These activities are referenced in the body of the chapter, with links to the activities in the ebook. Each chapter concludes with an *Assessing Your Communication* quiz.

Digital Resources

Whether you have taught with *Interplay* for many years or are encountering it for the first time, you'll discover a toolkit of material that makes teaching more efficient and learning more effective.

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Julie Allee

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Anoka-Ramsey Community College

Marie Arcidiacono

Los Medanos College–Brentwood Campus

Aurora Auter

University of Southwestern Louisiana

Diane M. Badzinski

Colorado Christian University

Margaret Baker

Kalamazoo Valley Community College

Nancy Bandiera

LaGuardia Community College

Sharon Beal

Long Beach City College/Chapman University

Constance Berman

Berkshire Community College

Heather Bixler

College of the Sequoias

Ellen Bland

Central Carolina Community College

Sandra Bodin-Lerner

Kean University

Jennifer Bone

Front Range Community College

Mark Bottita

Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana

Colleen Butcher

University of Florida

Chantele S. Carr

Estrella Mountain College

Leeva Chung

University of San Diego

Kathleen Czech

Point Loma Nazarene University

Andrea M. Davis

University of South Carolina Upstate

Audrey Deterding

Northern Arizona University

Patricia Dobson

Eastern New Mexico University

Liz Edgecomb

Xavier University of Louisiana

Sarah Ellis

Mitchell Technical Institute

Katrina Eicher

Elizabethtown Community College

Vanessa Ferguson

Mott Community College

Susan Fletcher

Hocking College

Karyn Friesen

Lone Star College—Montgomery

Kristin K. Froemling

Radford University

Darlene J. Geiger

Portland State University

Denise Gilmer-Knudson

College of Southern Maryland

Debra Gonsher

Bronx Community College

Michelle Graber

Mitchell Technical Institute

Em Griffin

Wheaton College

Edna Grover-Bisker

Missouri University of Science and Technology

Lowell Habel

Chapman University

Gail Hankins

Wake Technical College

Debra Harper-LeBlanc

Lone Star College–North Harris

Meredith Harrigan

SUNY Geneseo

Kristin Haun

University of Tennessee

Lisa C. Hebert

Louisiana State University

Brittany W. Hochstaetter

Wake Technical Community College

Shaorong Huang

Raymond Walters College—University of Cincinnati

Daniel Johnson

Southwestern Michigan College

Joy A. Jones

Atlantic Cape Community College

Beverly Merrill Kelley

California Lutheran University

Betty Kennan

Radford University

Cheryl Knowles-Harrigan

Atlantic Cape Community College

Jessica Kratzer

Northern Kentucky University

Anastasia Kurylo

Marymount Manhattan College

Andrea Lambert South

Northern Kentucky University

Deborah Layton

Cowley College

Shyla Lefever

Old Dominion University

Phil Martin

North Central State College

Julie Mayberry

North Carolina State University

Bonnie McCracken

SUNY Geneseo

Cynara M. Medina

Western Nevada College

Lucas Messer

Scottsdale Community College

Tim Moreland

Catawba College

Mark Morman

Baylor University

Kelly Morrison

Michigan State University

Candice Munoz

Mott Community College

Donell Murray

Morehead State University

Johance F. Murray

Hostos Community College/CUNY

Noreen Mysyk

North Central College

Gretchen R. Norling

University of West Florida

Jennifer Ott

Kalamazoo Valley Community College

Craig Parmley

Ivy Tech Community College

Karri Pearson

Normandale Community College

Joey Pogue

Pittsburg State University

Tracey Powers

Central Arizona College

Laurie Pratt

Chaffey College

Narissra Punyanunt-Carter

Texas Tech University

Rasha I. Ramzy

Georgia State University

Leighann Rechtin

Ivy Tech Community College

Rachel Reznik

Elmhurst College

Elizabeth Ribarsky

University of Illinois—Springfield

Gregory Rickert

Bluegrass Community & Technical College

Jennifer Riggs Smith

Ivy Tech Community College

Lori Roe

Ivy Tech Community College

Jennifer A. Samp

University of Georgia

Heidi Schara

Riverland Community College

Julie Simanski

Des Moines Area Community College

Debbie Sonandre

Tacoma Community College

Renee Strom

Saint Cloud State University

Dennis Sutton

Grand Rapids Community College

Lindsay Timmerman

University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

Samantha Valencia

Moreno Valley College

Anita Vangelisti

University of Texas at Austin

Judith Vogel

Des Moines Area Community College

Rebecca Wells-Gonzalez

Ivy Tech Community College

Emanuelle Wessels

Missouri State University

Stacie Williams

Portland Community College

Michael Witti

Waukesha County Technical College

Gordon Young

Kingsborough Community College

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About the Authors

Ronald B. Adler

Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II

Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh

Arizona State University

Ronald B. Adler is Professor Emeritus of Communication at Santa Barbara City College. He is coauthor of *Understanding Human Communication* (OUP, 2024); *Essential Communication* (OUP, 2022); *Looking Out, Looking In* (2023); and *Communicating at Work: Principles and Practices for Business and the Professions* (2023). Beyond his professional life, Ron tries to give back to his community. He also enjoys cycling, hiking, traveling, and spending time with his family.

Russell F. Proctor II is Professor Emeritus of Communication at Northern Kentucky University. He won NKU's Outstanding Professor Award in 1997 and has also received recognition for his teaching from the National Communication Association, the Central States Communication Association, and the Kentucky

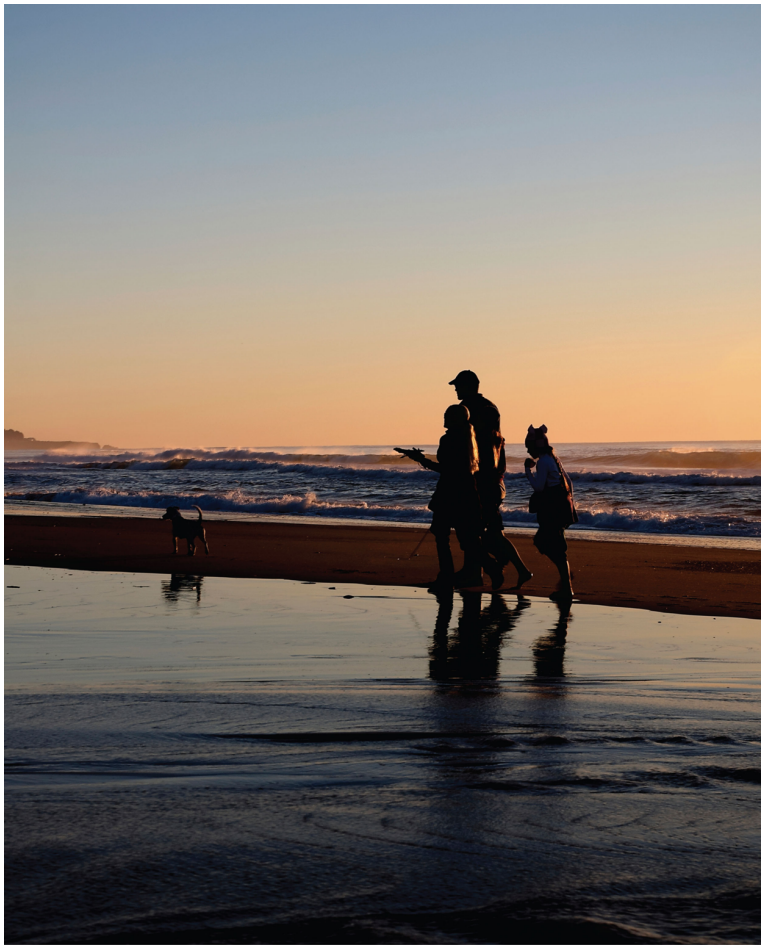
Communication Association. Russ joined the *Interplay* team in the mid-1990s and was the lead author on this edition of the book. He loves sports, music, binge-watching TV series, and traveling with family and friends.

1
Interpersonal Process

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **1.1** **Outline the needs that communication satisfies.**
- **1.2** **Explain the interpersonal communication process, from its transactional nature to governing principles.**
- **1.3** **Describe the characteristics of interpersonal versus impersonal communication.**

1.4 Identify characteristics of effective communication and competent communicators.

EVERYONE COMMUNICATES. Students and professors, parents and children, employers and employees, friends, strangers, and enemies—all communicate. We have been communicating with others from earliest childhood and will almost certainly keep doing so until we die.

Why study an activity you've done your entire life? First, studying interpersonal communication will give you a new look at a familiar topic. For instance, you may not have realized that you can't *not* communicate or that more communication doesn't always improve relationships—topics you'll read about in a few pages. In this sense, exploring human communication is like studying anatomy or botany—everyday objects and processes take on new meaning.

A second, more compelling reason is that we all could stand to be more effective communicators. Surveys show that communication problems are at the root of most relational breakups, ahead of factors such as money, sex, or other conflict issues (Entwistle et al., 2021; Gravningen et al., 2017). Ineffective communication is also a major problem in the workplace, leading to stress, failure to complete projects, and a loss of sales (Tishma, 2019). In other

words, poor communication isn't just a symptom of strained personal or professional relationships; it's often the cause.

Pause now to make a mental list of communication problems you have encountered. You'll probably see that no matter how successful your relationships are at home, with friends, at school, and at work, there's plenty of room for improvement in your everyday life. The information that follows will help you communicate better with some of the people who matter most to you.

1.1 Why We Communicate

Research demonstrating the importance of communication has been around longer than you might think. Frederick II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire from 1220 to 1250, reportedly carried out experiments on language deprivation. A medieval historian described a dramatically inhumane one, in which Frederick forbade foster mothers and nurses from talking to babies and children:

> He bade foster mothers and nurses to suckle the children, to bathe and wash them, but in no way to prattle with them, for he wanted to learn whether they would speak the Hebrew language, which was the oldest, or Greek, or Latin, or Arabic, or perhaps the language of their parents, of whom they had been born. But he labored in vain because all the children died. For they could not live without the petting and joyful faces and loving words of their foster mothers. (Ross & McLaughlin, 1949)

Social scientists have found less barbaric ways to investigate the importance of communication. In one classic study of isolation, five volunteers were paid to remain alone in a locked room. One lasted for 8 days. Three held out for 2 days, one commenting, “Never again.” The fifth participant lasted only 2 hours (Schachter, 1959). Based on findings like this, psychologists have since concluded that solitary confinement is a form of torture (Muller, 2018).

The costs of social isolation became prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Millions of people around the world were forced to isolate —some for months—without physical contact with anyone outside their household. Experts found that this separation took a toll on

people's mental and physical well-being (Clair et al., 2021). And more than a third of surveyed Americans said that socializing and going out became less enticing after the pandemic (Sharpe & Spencer, 2022). It may be years before there's a full reckoning of the impact of the pandemic on personal and relational health. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for a related reflection exercise.)

It's true that everybody needs alone time, often more than we get (more on that later in this chapter). On the other hand, there's a point beyond which solitude becomes loneliness. In other words, we all need people. We all need to communicate.

1.1.1 Physical Needs

Communication is so important that its presence or absence affects health. People who process a negative experience by putting their feelings into words report improved life satisfaction, as well as enhanced mental and physical health, compared with those who only think privately about it (Torre & Lieberman, 2018). Research conducted with police officers found that being able to talk easily with colleagues and supervisors about work-related trauma was linked to greater physical and mental health (Stephens & Long, 2000). And a broader study of over 3,500 adults revealed that as little as 10 minutes of talking a day, face to face or by phone, improves memory and boosts intellectual function (Ybarra et al., 2008).

Watch and Discuss 1.1: "Going It Alone"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. How long do you think you could last without interpersonal communication? What effects would this loss have on you?
2. Discuss the relationship between loneliness and communication.

Note: This video previews topics covered extensively in later chapters, including social media (Chapter 2), social comparison (Chapter 4), listening (Chapter 8), and interpersonal relationships (Chapters 10 and 11).

In extreme cases, communication can even become a matter of life or death. As a navy pilot, the late U.S. Senator John McCain was shot down over North Vietnam and held as a prisoner of war (POW) for more than 5 years, often in solitary confinement. POWs in his camp set up codes to send messages by tapping on walls, laboriously spelling out words. McCain described the importance of maintaining contact with one another despite serious risks:

> The punishment for communicating could be severe, and a few POWs, having been caught and beaten for their efforts, had their spirits broken as their bodies were battered. Terrified of a return trip to the punishment room, they would lie still in their

> cells when their comrades tried to tap them up on the wall. Very few would remain uncommunicative for long. To suffer all this alone was less tolerable than torture. Withdrawing in silence from the fellowship of other Americans … was to us the approach of death. (McCain, 1999)

Communication isn't a necessity just for POWs. Evidence gathered by a host of researchers (e.g., Dunbar, 2021; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2016) has shown that interpersonal relationships are vital among civilians as well. For example:

- Socially connected people—those with strong networks of family and friends—live an average of 3.7 years longer than those who are socially isolated.
- People with strong relationships have significantly lower risks of coronary disease, hypertension, and excess weight than do people with less social integration.
- Divorced, separated, or widowed people are 5 to 10 times more likely to need hospitalization for mental illnesses than their married counterparts. Happily married people also have lower incidences of pneumonia, surgery, and cancer than single people. (It's important to note that the *quality* of the relationship is more important than the institution of marriage in these studies.)

After spending a year alone in space, astronaut Scott Kelly described his biggest challenge: "I think the hardest part is being isolated in a physical sense from people on the ground that are important to you." ***How satisfied are you with the amount and quality of personal contact in your life? What would be the ideal amount of contact?*** View larger image

1.1.2 Identity Needs

Communication does more than enable us to survive. It's the primary way we learn who we are (Harwood, 2005). As you'll read in Chapter 4, our sense of identity comes from the ways we interact with other people. Do you consider yourself smart or foolish, attractive or unattractive, skillful or inept? The answers to these questions don't

come from looking in the mirror. The reactions of others shape identity.

Consider the case of the famous "Wild Boy of Aveyron," who appeared to have spent his early childhood without human contact. The boy was discovered in January 1800 while digging for vegetables in a French village garden. He could not speak, and he showed no behaviors one would expect in a social human. More significant was his lack of any identity as a human being. As author Roger Shattuck (1980) put it, "The boy had no human sense of being in the world. He had no sense of himself as a person related to other persons." Only after the influence of a loving foster mother did the boy begin to behave as a human.

Contemporary accounts support the essential role communication plays in shaping identity. In some cases, children who have been raised with limited or no human contact have demonstrated communication patterns similar to those of animals they grew up around (Newton, 2002). They do not appear to have developed a sense of themselves as humans before interacting with other people. Similarly, *Dani's Story* (Lierow, 2011) tells of an abandoned child who was rescued by a loving family and taught to communicate. After considerable time and investment, she was ultimately able to say of herself, "I pretty."

Each of us enters the world with little or no sense of identity. You gain an idea of who you are from the way others define you. As Chapter 4 explains, the messages each of us receives in early

childhood are the strongest identity shapers, although the influence of others continues throughout life.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

The Epidemic of Loneliness

"Ah, look at all the lonely people," sang the Beatles in the 1960s. Little did they know that in the following decades, loneliness would become an even greater social issue. A 2018 study revealed that roughly 20 percent of Americans always or often feel lonely or socially isolated (DiJulio et al., 2018). A more recent survey nearly tripled those estimates (Minemyer, 2022). Both studies show that loneliness takes a toll on one's physical, mental, and relational wellbeing—so much so that the U.S. Surgeon General identified loneliness as a health epidemic (Caron, 2023).

For years, loneliness research focused on older people, who were likely to have experienced retirement, relocation, or the death of loved ones. But recent studies show that loneliness is also rampant among younger people (Richardson, 2019). Many have blamed technology, as you'll read in Chapter 2. Ironically, the same digital devices that can enable communication might bear some responsibility for new levels of loneliness (Davis et al., 2019).

Experts believe one solution is to engage in the cognitive reappraisal process described in Chapter 9 (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). Changing your self-talk ("I want to be with others; others want to be with me") is the starting point for

changing your feelings and consequent behavior. Another recommendation is volunteer service, where you're likely to communicate with likeminded people and feel positive about contributing to a larger cause (Caron, 2021).

All of this research points to the fact that communicating with and relating to others are basic to human health.

1.1.3 Social Needs

Because interpersonal relationships are vital, some theorists argue that communicating with others is the primary goal of human existence, foundational to life satisfaction (Rohrer et al, 2018). One anthropologist (Goldschmidt, 1990) calls the drive for meeting social needs through communication "the human career."

There's a strong link between the quality of communication and the success of relationships. For example, children who grow up in strong conversation-oriented families report having more satisfying friendships when they become adults (Ledbetter, 2009). Perhaps that's why parents identify communication as the most important skill set their children need to succeed in life, both personally and professionally (Goo, 2015).

Despite knowing that communication is crucial to social satisfaction, evidence suggests that many people aren't very successful at managing their interpersonal relationships. For example, one-third of Americans say they've never interacted with their neighbors, up

from one-fifth who said the same just a few decades ago (Poon, 2015). Of greater concern is that most Americans report having fewer close friends than they once did (Cox, 2021). They talk with those friends more infrequently and rely on them less for social support.

But ongoing relationships aren't the only way to meet social needs. Making small talk with strangers—a friendly cashier, a fellow dog owner at the park, a person standing with you in a line—generally raises happiness levels for all parties involved (Nicolaus, 2019). One study paired strangers in get-to-know-you video chats (Reece et al., 2023). Before and after these 1,656 conversations, researchers asked how the participants were feeling. The results were surprising:

> Remarkably, people in every age group reported feeling significantly better after a conversation with a stranger compared to how they felt before they began the call.
>
> They didn't feel just a *little bit* happier; the mood boost they got from these conversations was astonishing, comparable in size to proven happiness boosters like exercising or expressing gratitude. (Carter et al., 2023)

This doesn't mean you need to chat with every person you meet or share personal information with strangers. What it suggests is that human beings are social creatures who benefit from making interpersonal connections—even small ones.

1.1.4 Practical Needs

Along with satisfying physical, identity, and social needs, communication is essential in dealing with more practical matters. It's how we tell the hairstylist to take just a little off the sides, ask for

directions, or inform the plumber the broken pipe needs attention *now*!

Beyond these simple types of needs, a wealth of research demonstrates that communication is an essential ingredient for success in virtually every career (Coffelt et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2022) That's why a broad survey (Schaffhauser, 2019) showed that employers are looking foremost for these "uniquely human skills" in new hires, regardless of field:

- The ability to listen
- Attentiveness and attention to detail
- Effective communication
- Critical thinking
- Strong interpersonal abilities

@WORK

Office Versus Home: Communication Considerations

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, job and home were separate domains for most people. Then suddenly millions of employers shut down on-site operations. Platforms like Zoom, Teams, and Meet became the new workspace. You couldn't come to the office even if you wanted to.

After almost two years, working onsite became an option again. Some employers encouraged—even demanded—that personnel return to the office. "We don't invent rockets that

land themselves by people working on Zoom calls once a week," said one Silicon Valley executive (Goldberg, 2022b). "We have to get together in a room and get on whiteboards." Others embraced the idea of continuing remote work. "We're operating in a virtual environment" said another CEO, "and we're not going to change that" (Telford, 2022).

Employee reaction was varied. Some workers welcomed the chance to reconnect with colleagues and clients in person. Others had become attached to the flexibility of working remotely. And for some, working from home removed stresses that can come from office life, such as social exclusion because of a personal identity (Goldberg, 2022a). As one Black woman observed about workplace interaction, "The side conversations, the pre-meeting conversations, the post-meeting conversations, the inside jokes—they all subtly add up to tell you that you don't quite fit."

As you look for a rewarding job, consider your communication preferences. If you're energized by face-to-face collaboration and socializing with the team, look for an organization that encourages in-person interaction. If your personal needs and work style favor independence and flexibility, you'll be happier in a company that fits this model. And perhaps a hybrid home–office approach will be the best match of all.

On-the-job communication skills can even make the difference between life and death for doctors, nurses, and other medical practitioners. Researchers discovered that "communication failures"

in hospitals and doctors' offices were linked to more than 1,700 U.S. deaths in a recent 5-year period (Bailey, 2016). Studies also show a significant difference between the communication skills of physicians who had no malpractice claims against them and doctors with previous claims (Carroll, 2015).

Communication is just as important outside of work. This book will introduce you to a variety of practical skills—such as perception-checking, active listening, responsible language use, win–win conflict management—that will enhance your success in the personal relationships described in Chapters 10 and 11.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1968) suggested that human needs fall into five categories, which must be satisfied in order. As you read about each need, think about the role of communication. The most basic needs are *physical*: sufficient air, water, food, and rest and the ability to reproduce as a species. The second category of Maslow's needs involves *safety*: protection from threats to our well-being. Beyond physical and safety concerns are the *social* needs described earlier. Next, Maslow suggests that each of us has the need for *self-esteem*: the desire to believe we are worthwhile, valuable people. The final category of needs involves *self-actualization*: the desire to develop our potential to the maximum, to become the best person we can be.

1.2 The Communication Process

So far, we have talked about communication as if its meaning were perfectly clear. In fact, scholars have debated the definition of communication for years (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Despite their many disagreements, most would concur that at its essence, **communication** is about using messages to generate meanings (Korn et al., 2000). Notice how this basic definition holds true across a variety of contexts—public speaking, small groups, mass media, and so forth. The goal of this section is to explain how messages and meanings are created in interpersonal communication and to describe the many factors involved in this complex process.

1.2.1 Early Models of Communication

As the old saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words." With that principle in mind, social scientists of the 1950s created models of the communication process. These early, simplistic models characterized communication as a one-way, linear event—something a sender "does" by encoding a message and delivering it to a passive receiver who decodes it. This one-way process resembles an archer (the sender) shooting an arrow (the message) at a target (the

receiver). For some examples of communication, a linear model can be fitting. If you labor over a thank-you note to get the tone just right before sending it, your message is primarily a one-way effort.

Later models represented communication as more of a tennis game, in which players hit balls (send messages) to receivers who then respond. This **feedback**, or response to a previous message, can be verbal or nonverbal. A back-and-forth chain of text messages seems to fit this description pretty well.

Yet those models fail to capture the complexity of the human beings involved in the process. Over time, communication theorists developed increasingly sophisticated versions in an attempt to depict all the factors that affect human interaction.

1.2.2 Insights from the Transactional Communication Model

No model can completely represent the process of communication any more than a map can capture everything about the neighborhood where you live. Still, Figure 1.1 reflects a number of important characteristics of **transactional communication**, the dynamic process in which communicators create meaning together through interaction.

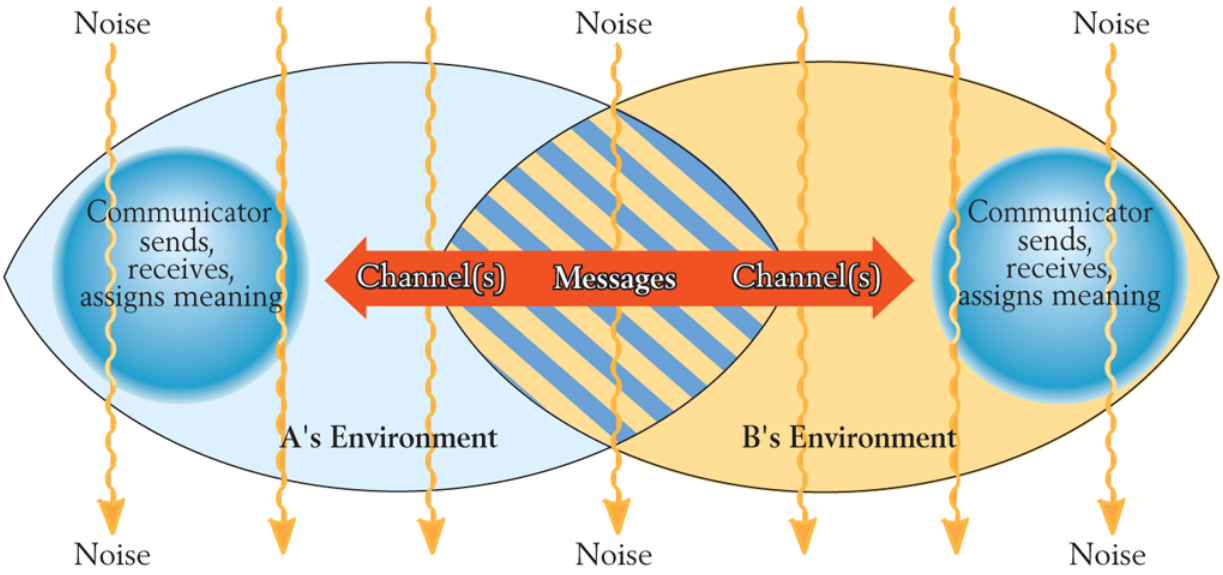


FIGURE 1.1 Transactional Communication Model View larger image

Sending and Receiving Are Usually Simultaneous

Some forms of communication, such as email, social media posts, voice messages, or "snail mail" letters, are asynchronous: There's a delay between when they are sent and received. But in face-to-face interaction, it's hard to distinguish sender and receiver. Consider a few examples:

- A teacher explaining a difficult concept to a student after class
- A parent lecturing a teenager about the family's curfew rules
- A salesperson giving a customer information about a product

The impulse is to identify the teacher, parent, and salesperson as senders, whereas the student, teenager, and customer are receivers. Now imagine a confused look on the student's face; the teenager

interrupting defensively; the customer blankly staring into the distance. It's easy to see that these verbal and nonverbal responses are messages being sent, even while the other person is talking. Because it's often impossible to distinguish sender from receiver, our communication model replaces these roles with the more accurate term *communicator*. This term reflects the fact that—at least in face-to-face situations—people are simultaneously senders and receivers who exchange multiple messages.

Meanings Exist in and Among People

A time-honored axiom among communication scholars is that "meanings are in people." A word, phrase, or gesture doesn't have meaning until you give it meaning. Perhaps you can think of a comment someone meant as an insult but you took positively. Likewise, you may interpret someone's compliment ("You're pretty smart") as a backhanded jab (think of ways you could construe that phrase negatively). The same is true with nonverbal cues. You might see a furrowed brow as a signal to stop talking, when the person was trying to communicate genuine interest. It's important to realize that you assign meaning to words and gestures in unique ways—and that your interpretations might not match others' intentions.

1. How do you interpret the phrase "like a girl"? Has that changed for you over the years?

2. Discuss how this video illustrates the notion that *meanings exist in and among people*.

But meanings aren't assigned in a vacuum. Each of us is shaped by the environment in which we live (more on this in the following section). You learn and create meanings with others, which is why meaning is also *among* people. In the United States, a raised middle finger is a gesture of contempt, while "thumbs up" is positive. You'll read in Chapter 7 that nonverbal signals like these have different meanings in other cultures. As long as you're in the U.S., however, you need to follow societal rules for using these gestures (don't "flip the bird" to a judge and then explain that it means "Have a nice day" to you). Similarly, we decide with others which words are "good" and "bad"—and those meanings can shift over time and within co-cultures. Consider how "wicked" and "sick" are high compliments in some settings.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

A Better Understanding of Misunderstandings

It never feels good to be misunderstood. A team led by Renee Edwards surveyed 400 undergraduate students about misunderstandings in interpersonal relationships. Their findings offer helpful previews of topics covered in this textbook. Here are some of their conclusions:

- *Misunderstandings occur more often in mediated communication than in the face-to-face variety*. One respondent described how the simple text response "k" can be interpreted—or misinterpreted—in a host of ways. See Chapter 2 for more on mediated communication, and Section 7.2.4 on the challenges of decoding text-based messages.
- *Relational satisfaction leads to fewer misunderstandings and more open communication*. The state of your relationship affects the quality of your communication. See Chapter 10 for information on building and maintaining satisfying interpersonal relationships.
- *Misunderstandings between romantic partners are rated as more serious than those with friends*. Chapter 11 takes a close look at communication in friendships, families, and romantic relationships.

It's challenging to share meaning with others, even in our closest relationships. This textbook offers a variety of concepts and skills to help communicators reach mutual understanding.

Edwards, R., Frost, J., Harvey, A. J., Navarro, M., & Adams, B. T. (2020). Relationships among misunderstanding, relationship type, channel, and relational satisfaction. *Communication Research Reports, 37,* 298–308.

Environment and Noise Affect Communication

Problems often arise because communicators occupy different **environments** (sometimes called *contexts*): fields of experience

that help them make sense of others' behavior. In communication terminology, *environment* refers not only to a physical location but also to the personal experiences and cultural background that participants bring to a conversation. You can appreciate the influence of environments by considering your beliefs about an important topic such as work, marriage, or government policies. How might your beliefs be different if your personal history were different?

Notice how the model in Figure 1.1 shows that the environments of **A** and **B** overlap. This intersecting area represents the background the communicators have in common. If this overlap didn't exist, communication would be difficult, if not impossible.

Whereas similar environments often facilitate communication, different backgrounds can make effective communication more challenging. Consider just some of the factors that might contribute to different environments, and to communication challenges as a result:

- **A** might belong to one ethnic group and **B** to another.
- **A** might have a lot of money and **B** have relatively little.
- **A** might be rushed and **B** have nowhere to go.
- **A** might have lived a long, eventful life, and **B** could be young and inexperienced.
- **A** might be passionately concerned with the subject and **B** indifferent to it.

Another factor in the environment that makes communication difficult is what communication scholars call **noise**: anything that interferes with the transmission and reception of a message. Three types of noise can disrupt communication. *External noise* includes factors outside the receiver that make it difficult to hear, as well as many other kinds of distractions. For instance, loud music in a bar or a jackhammer grinding in the street might make it hard for you to pay attention to another person. *Physiological noise* involves biological factors in the receiver that interfere with accurate reception: hearing loss, lack of vision, illness, and so on. *Psychological noise* refers to cognitive factors that make communication less effective. For instance, a woman who is called "girl" may become so irritated that she has trouble listening to the rest of a speaker's message.

Channels Make a Difference

Communication scholars use the term **channel** to describe the medium through which messages are exchanged (Lee, 2022). Along with face-to-face interaction, you have the option of using mediated channels such as texting, email, phone calls, and social media. The communication channel can affect the way you respond to a message. For example, a string of texted emojis probably won't have the same effect as a handwritten expression of affection, and being fired from a job in person would likely feel different from getting the bad news in an email.

Even small channel differences can affect the messages you create. For instance, you're more likely to send negative Twitter posts from a mobile device than you would from a computer (Murthy et al., 2015). Mobile-sent tweets also tend to be more egocentric, using first-person pronouns such as *I, me, my, mine*. In other words, the phrase "I'm mad" is more typical of a tweet posted from a phone than from a computer. That's because mobile devices encourage more spontaneous communication—for better or for worse. In the next chapter, you'll read much more about choosing the best channel for the situation.

1.2.3 Communication Principles

Beyond communication models, several principles explain the nature of communication. Communication is transactional—created through interaction; it can be intentional or unintentional; it is irreversible; it is unrepeatable; and it involves both content and relationship dimensions.

Communication Is Transactional

The transactional model suggests that communicators create meaning through their interaction with one another. Perhaps the most important consequence of communication's transactional nature is mutual influence. To put it simply, communication isn't something we do *to* others; rather, it is an activity we do *with* them.

In this sense, communication is like dancing with a partner: No matter how skilled you are, success depends on the other person's behavior as well as your own. In communication and in dancing, the partners must adapt to and coordinate with each other. Further, relational communication—like dancing—is a unique creation that arises from how the partners interact. The way you dance probably varies from one partner to another because of its cooperative, transactional nature. Likewise, the way you communicate almost certainly varies with different partners. That's why competent communicators score high in adaptability, as you'll read later in this chapter.

Psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991) expresses the transactional nature of communication well when he points out how our success depends on interaction with others. As he says, "one cannot be 'attractive' without others who are attracted, a 'leader' without others willing to follow, or a 'loving person' without others to affirm with appreciation."

Communication Can Be Intentional or Unintentional

Some communication is clearly deliberate: You probably plan your words carefully before asking the boss for a raise or offering constructive criticism. A minority of scholars (e.g., Motley, 1990) argue that only intentional messages like these qualify as communication. However, others (e.g., Buck & VanLear, 2002) suggest that even unintentional behavior is communicative. Suppose, for instance, that a friend overhears you muttering complaints to yourself. Even though you didn't intend for your friend to hear your

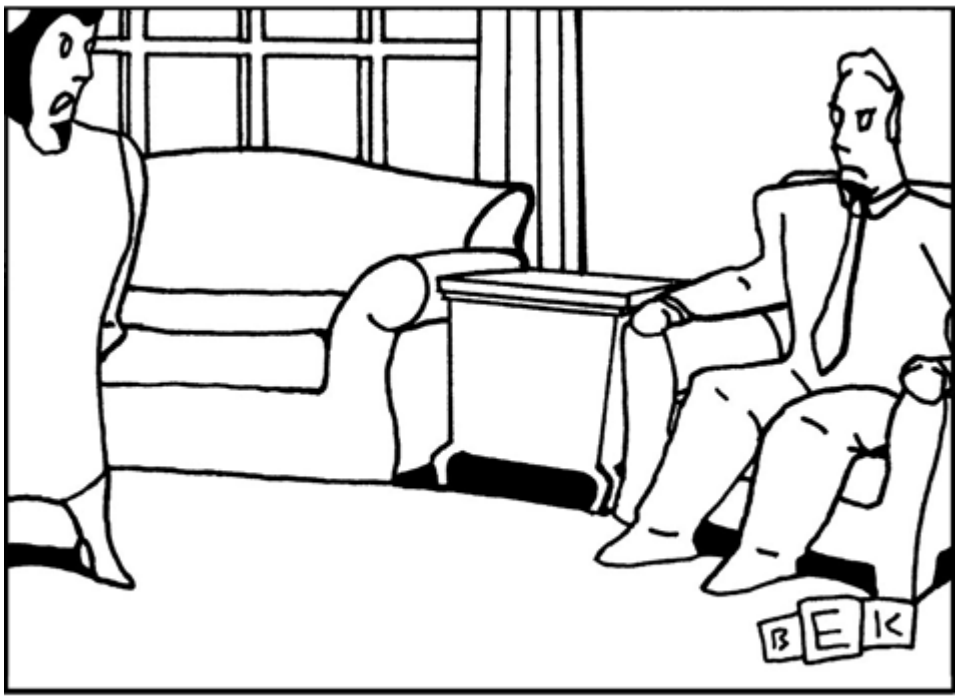
remarks, they certainly did carry a message. In addition to these slips of the tongue, we unintentionally send many nonverbal messages. You might not be aware of your sour expression, impatient shifting, or sighs of boredom, but others read into them nonetheless.

Even the seeming absence of a behavior has communicative value. Recall times when you sent a text or left a voice message and received no reply. You probably assigned some meaning to the nonresponse. Was the other person angry? Indifferent? Too busy to reply? Whether your hunch was correct, the point remains: All behavior has communicative value. "Nothing" never happens.

Interplay assumes the communicative value of both intentional and unintentional behavior. This book takes the position that whatever you do—whether you speak or remain silent, confront or avoid, show emotion or keep a poker face—you provide information to others about your thoughts and feelings. In this sense, we are like transmitters that can't be shut off. We cannot *not* communicate (Watzlawick et al., 1967; see also Bavelas, 2021).

Communication Is Irreversible

At times, you probably wish you could erase your words or actions. Unfortunately, you can't undo communication. Sometimes, further explanation can clear up confusion, or an apology can mollify hurt feelings, but other times nothing can change the impression you have created. It is no more possible to "unsend" a message—including most digital messages—than to "unsqueeze" a tube of toothpaste. Words said, messages sent, and deeds done are irretrievable.



"Let's stop this before we both say a lot of things we mean."

Communication Is Unrepeatable

Because communication is an ongoing process, an event cannot be repeated. The friendly smile you gave a stranger last week may not succeed with the person you encounter tomorrow. Even with the same person, it's impossible to recreate an event. Why? Because both you and the other person have changed. You've both lived longer, and your feelings about each other may have changed. What may seem like the same words and behavior are different each time they are spoken or performed.

Communication Has a Content Dimension and a Relational Dimension

Virtually all exchanges have content and relational dimensions. The **content dimension** involves the information being explicitly discussed: “Please pass the salt”; “Not now, I’m tired”; “You forgot to check your messages.” All messages also have a **relational dimension** (Watzlawick et al., 1967; Bavelas, 2021), which expresses how you feel about the other person. For instance, something in your tone might reflect whether you like or dislike the other person, feel in control or subordinate, or feel comfortable or anxious. Consider saying “Thanks a lot” in different ways depending on the relational dimension.

Sometimes the content dimension of a message is all that matters. For example, you may not care how the barista feels about you as long as you get your coffee. In a qualitative sense, however, the relational dimension of a message is often more important than the content under discussion. This point explains why disputes over apparently trivial subjects become so important. In such cases, we’re not really arguing over whose turn it is to take out the trash or whether to stay home or go out. Instead, we’re disputing the nature of the relationship: who’s in control, and how important we are to each other. Chapter 10 explores several key relational issues in detail.

1.2.4 Communication Misconceptions

Now that you've learned what communication *is*, it's time to identify some things it *isn't*. Avoiding these common misconceptions (adapted from McCroskey & Richmond, 1996) can save you a great deal of trouble in your personal life.

Not All Communication Seeks Understanding

You might assume that the goal of all communication is to maximize understanding between communicators. But although some understanding is necessary to coordinate our interactions, there are some types of communication in which understanding, as we usually conceive it, isn't the primary goal (Smith et al., 2010). Consider, for example, the following:

- *Social rituals we enact every day*. "How's it going?" you ask. "Great," the other person replies, even if it isn't actually going great. The primary goal in exchanges like these is mutual acknowledgment. The unstated message is "I consider you important enough to notice." There's obviously no serious attempt to exchange information.
- *Attempts to influence others*. Most television commercials are aimed at persuading viewers to buy products, not helping viewers understand the content of the ad. In the same way, many of our attempts at persuading others don't involve a

desire for understanding, just for compliance with our wishes.

- *Deliberate ambiguity and deception*. When you decline an unwanted invitation by saying, "I can't make it," you probably want to create the impression that the decision is really beyond your control. (If your goal were to be perfectly clear, you might say, "I don't want to get together. In fact, I'd rather do almost anything than accept your invitation.") As we explain in detail in Chapter 4, people often lie or hedge their remarks precisely because they want to obscure their true thoughts and feelings.

More Communication Isn't Always Better

Whereas failure to communicate effectively and often enough can certainly cause problems, excessive communication also can be a mistake. Sometimes it is simply unproductive, as when people go over the same ground again and again. Parental lectures may be tuned out by teens whose only thought is, "Are you done yet?"

There are times when talking too much actually aggravates a problem (Pinola, 2014). As two communication pioneers put it, "More and more negative communication merely leads to more and more negative results" (McCroskey & Wheeless, 1976). When people are angry, they may say hurtful things they will later regret. In such cases it's probably best to spend time cooling off, thinking about what to say and how to say it. Chapter 9 will help you decide when and how to share feelings.

Communication Will Not Solve All Problems

Sometimes even the best planned, best timed communication won't solve a problem. For example, imagine that you ask an instructor to explain why you received a poor grade on a project you believe deserved top marks. The professor clearly outlines the reasons why you received the low grade and sticks to that position after listening thoughtfully to your protests. Has communication solved the problem? Hardly.

Sometimes clear communication is even the cause of problems. Suppose, for example, that a friend asks you for an honest opinion of a colorful new outfit. Your clear and sincere answer, "I think it makes you look like a clown," might do more harm than good. Deciding when and how to self-disclose isn't always easy. See Chapter 4 for suggestions.

Effective Communication Is Not a Natural Ability

Most people assume that communication is like breathing—that it's something people can do without training. Although nearly everyone does manage to function passably without much formal communication training, most people operate at a level of effectiveness far below their potential. In fact, communication skills are closer to an athletic or artistic ability. Even the most inept of us can learn to be more effective with training and practice, and even the most talented need to work to maintain and develop their skills.

1.3 What Makes Communication Interpersonal?

So far you've read about characteristics of communication in general. Now it's time to look at what makes some types of communication interpersonal versus impersonal.

1.3.1 Defining Interpersonal Communication

Which of the following are examples of interpersonal communication?

A. A customer asking a salesclerk for information about a product.
B. A physician encouraging a patient to adopt a healthier lifestyle.
C. A group of old friends reminiscing about good times.

If you suspect there's no simple answer here, you're correct. A good response would be, "It depends on what you mean by *interpersonal*." There are two ways to think about what makes some communication

interpersonal: (1) the *number* of people interacting and (2) the *quality* of the interaction.

A *quantitative approach* defines interpersonal communication by the number of communicators. By this yardstick, any two-person exchange fits the definition: ordering a double espresso at the coffee bar, asking a stranger for directions, or online chatting with a customer service agent. Social scientists call two persons interacting a *dyad* and use the adjective *dyadic* to describe this type of communication (Guntzviller et al., 2017). In this sense, Situations A and B in the preceding list would count as interpersonal since they involve dyads; Situation C would not.

But asking questions of a salesclerk hardly seems the same as catching up with an old friend. Some scholars argue that the quality of interaction, not the quantity of people interacting, distinguishes interpersonal communication (Jian & Dalisay, 2018). From a *qualitative approach*, interpersonal communication means treating one another as unique individuals. In this sense, Situation C in the preceding list would certainly count as interpersonal. Situation B might also fit if the physician and patient had a longstanding relationship or even a single conversation that was personal and heartfelt. Situation A is more impersonal than interpersonal, qualitatively speaking. A qualitative approach defines the opposite of interpersonal as *impersonal* interaction. You can picture a continuum between these two extremes (see Figure 1.2).

Highly Impersonal
(e.g., scheduling appointment, answering phone survey)
Highly Interpersonal
(e.g., marriage proposal, asking for forgiveness)

FIGURE 1.2 Impersonal–Interpersonal Communication Continuum View larger image

Four features distinguish highly interpersonal versus impersonal communication:

- *Uniqueness*. No two high-quality interpersonal relationships are the same. With one friend you might exchange good-natured insults, whereas with another you are careful never to offend. In one, you might express your affection freely; in another it might be an unspoken foundation of the relationship. Each relationship is defined by its own specific language, customs, and rituals—what communication scholars call a *relational culture* (Farrell et al., 2014).
- *Interdependence*. In highly interpersonal communication exchanges, the fate of the partners is connected. You might be able to brush off a stranger's anger, sadness, or excitement. But in a qualitatively interpersonal relationship, the other's life affects you. Your life would be significantly different without each other.
- *Self-disclosure*. In impersonal exchanges, you probably reveal little about yourself. By contrast, in interpersonal

exchanges you're more likely to share important thoughts and feelings, reflecting your comfort with the other person. This doesn't mean that all highly interpersonal relationships are warm and caring or that all self-disclosure is positive. It's possible to reveal negative personal information: "I really hate when you do that!" But note you'd probably say that only to someone with whom you have an interpersonal relationship.

- *Intrinsic rewards*. In impersonal exchanges you probably seek extrinsic rewards—payoffs that have little to do with the people involved. You listen to professors in class or talk to potential buyers of your used car in order to reach goals other than developing personal relationships. By contrast, in close relationships the best payoff is likely being with the other person. It doesn't matter what you talk about—developing the relationship is what's important.

With these characteristics in mind, this book adopts a qualitative approach and defines **interpersonal communication** as interaction distinguished by the qualities of uniqueness, interdependence, self-disclosure, and intrinsic rewards. (See the Assessing Your Communication quiz at the end of the chapter to analyze how interpersonal your relationships are.)

1.3.2 Interpersonal and Impersonal Communication: A Matter of Balance

Life without interpersonal relationships would be lonesome at best, and more likely bleak. That doesn't mean *all* communication should be interpersonal, or that constant communication is the ideal. Like a nutritious diet, the healthiest communication is a mixture—in this case between time together and time apart, and between deeper and more superficial interaction (Hall & Merolla, 2020).

Alone Time

High-quality interpersonal communication is important, but it takes a lot of energy. Even good times in a close relationship can leave you tired, and the drain is greater when you're discussing difficult issues (Hall, 2018). Time away from others—even the people who matter most—can be a way of recharging your emotional batteries and gaining perspective on the relationship. Whether it's practicing meditation, taking a solo road trip, or spending an evening with just you and the TV, it's good to carve out time for yourself.

Personal and Impersonal Communication

Most relationships are neither highly interpersonal nor entirely impersonal. Rather, they are likely to fall somewhere between these two extremes. There's often a personal element in even the most

impersonal situations. You might appreciate the unique sense of humor of a store clerk or spend a few moments sharing private thoughts with the person cutting your hair. And even the most tyrannical, demanding, by-the-book boss might show an occasional flash of humanity.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Building Relationships Before Doing Business

You've been assigned to a virtual work project with colleagues from around the globe. When you open the first Slack message from one of your new teammates, which of these introductions would you prefer?

1. "Hi team! We will be working on the project together in the coming month. I assume you all have the instruction manual, but just for the record, our first due date is two weeks from today."
2. "Hello, I am Genia from Ukraine. You can call me Anna as all my friends and family do. I am looking forward to working with you. Apart from studying I love to travel, read, and hike."

These are examples of (1) task-oriented and (2) relational-oriented opening messages that were exchanged in a study involving MBA students from schools around the world. Researchers analyzed the students' messages and found that when the opening lines were relationally oriented (as in the

second example), teammates would respond in kind with personal introductions. Groups that started this way were more likely to develop a psychologically safe communication climate, which in turn led to improved team performance.

When you have a task to complete with others, it may be tempting to get down to business right away. This research suggests that taking time at the front end to create an interpersonal bond will make the job go easier and better. (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for a related self-appraisal.)

Glikson, E., & Erez, M. (2020). The emergence of a communication climate in global virtual teams. *Journal of World Business, 55,* 101001.

Just as there's a personal element in many impersonal settings, there's also an impersonal side to even the most important relationships. In fact, most communication in close relationships is comfortably mundane (Laliker & Lannutti, 2014). There are occasions when you almost certainly don't want to be personal: when you're distracted, tired, busy, or just not interested. Interpersonal communication is like rich food in that too much can make you uncomfortable. In fact, the scarcity of interpersonal communication contributes to its value (Mehl et al., 2010). Like precious and one-of-a-kind artwork, qualitatively interpersonal communication is special because it's rare.

1.4 Communication Competence

"What does it take to communicate better?" is probably the most important question to ask as you read this book. Answering it has been one of the leading challenges for communication scholars. Research has identified a good deal of important and useful information about communication competence.

1.4.1 Principles of Communication Competence

Most scholars agree that **communication competence** is the ability to achieve goals in a manner that is both *effective* and *appropriate* (Mikkelson et al., 2021). To understand these two dimensions, consider how you might handle everyday communication challenges such as declining an unwanted invitation or asking a friend to stop an annoying behavior. In cases such as these, *effective* communication would get the results you want. *Appropriate* communication would do so in a way that, in most cases, avoids damaging the relationship in which it occurs.

You can appreciate the importance of both appropriateness and effectiveness by imagining approaches that would satisfy one of these criteria but not the other. Yelling at your restaurant server may get

your meal to come quickly, but you probably wouldn't be welcome back (and you might want to check your food before eating it). Likewise, saying "That's fine" to your roommate when things *aren't* fine might maintain the relationship on the surface but leave you frustrated. With the goal of encouraging a balance between effectiveness and appropriateness, the following paragraphs outline several important principles of communication competence. (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter for a related skill builder.)

On the TV series *Hell's Kitchen*, chef Gordon Ramsay gets the job done—but often treats his staff poorly in the process. On *MasterChef Junior*, he is much more appropriate as a cooking coach while remaining effective. ***Is your communication generally both appropriate and effective? Why or why not?*** View larger image

There's No Single "Ideal" or "Effective" Way to Communicate

Your own experience shows that a variety of communication styles can be effective. Some very successful communicators are serious, whereas others use humor; some are gregarious, others are quieter; and some are more straightforward while others hint diplomatically. Furthermore, a type of communication that is competent in one setting might be a colossal blunder in another. The joking insults you routinely trade with a friend might offend a sensitive family member, and Saturday night's romantic approach would be out of place at work on Monday morning. No list of rules or tips will guarantee your success as a communicator.

Flexibility is especially important when members of different cultures meet. For instance, the definition of appropriate communication in a given situation varies considerably from one culture to another (Arasaratnam, 2007). Customs such as belching after a meal or appearing nude in public might be appropriate in some parts of the world but outrageous in others. There are also subtler differences in competent communication. For example, qualities such as self-disclosure and straight talk may be valued in the United States but considered overly aggressive and insensitive in many Asian cultures (Zhang, 2015). You'll read more about the many dimensions of intercultural competence in Chapter 3.

Competence Is Situational

Because competent communication varies so much from one situation and person to another, it's a mistake to think of it as a trait that a person either possesses or lacks. It's more accurate to talk about degrees or areas of competence.

You and the people you know are probably quite competent in some areas and less so in others. For example, you might deal quite skillfully with peers while feeling clumsy interacting with people much older or younger, or who are more or less accomplished than you. In fact, your competence may vary from situation to situation. It's an overgeneralization to say, in a moment of distress, "I'm a terrible communicator!" It's more accurate to say, "I didn't handle this situation very well, but I'm better in others."

Competence Can Be Learned

To some degree, biology is destiny when it comes to communication competence (Teven et al., 2010). Research suggests that certain personality traits predispose people toward particular competence skills (Hullman et al., 2010). For instance, those who are agreeable and conscientious by nature find it easier to be appropriate and harder to be (and become) assertive and effective.

Fortunately, biology isn't the only factor that shapes how we communicate. Communication competence is, to a great degree, a set of skills that anyone can learn. For instance, people with communication anxiety often benefit from courses and training

(Hunter et al., 2014). Skills instruction has also been shown to help communicators in a variety of professional fields (Hynes, 2012; Dorough et al., 2021). Even without systematic training, it's possible to develop communication skills through the processes of observation and trial and error. We learn from our own successes and failures, as well as from observing other models—both positive and negative. And, of course, the hope is that you will become a more competent communicator by putting the information in this book to work.

1.4.2 Characteristics of Competent Communication

Although competent communication varies from one situation to another, scholars have identified several common denominators that characterize it in most contexts. These include a large repertoire of skills, adaptability, the ability to perform, empathy, cognitive complexity, and self-monitoring.

A Large Repertoire of Skills

As you've already seen, good communicators don't use the same approach in every situation. They know that sometimes it's best to be blunt and sometimes tactful; that there is a time to speak up and a time to be quiet.

The chances of reaching your personal and relational goals increase with the number of options you have about how to communicate (Janke & Dumlao, 2019). For example, consider the many ways you could start a conversation with a stranger (Cuncic, 2022). You might get the ball rolling simply by introducing yourself. In other cases, seeking assistance might work well: "I've just moved here. What kind of neighborhood is the Eastside?" A third strategy is to ask a question about the situation: "I've never heard this band before. Do you know anything about them?" You could also offer a sincere compliment and follow it up with a question: "Great shoes! Where did you get them?" Just as a chef draws from a wide range of herbs and spices, a competent communicator can draw from a large array of potential behaviors. (You'll learn more about starting and holding conversations in Section 13.4.1.)

Adaptability

To extend this metaphor, a chef must know when to use garlic, chili, or sugar. Likewise, a competent communicator needs *adaptability*, selecting appropriate responses for each situation—and for each recipient. Adaptability is so important that competence researchers call it "the hallmark of interpersonal communication skills" (Hullman, 2015). Your language, tone, and style in a job interview, for example, should be different from what you'd use with your pals.

One study found that professors negatively appraised students who sent emails that included casual text language (such as "4" instead of "for" or "RU" instead of "are you") (Stephens et al., 2009). These students didn't adapt their message to an appropriate level of professional communication (Kemp & Clayton, 2017). Linguists note that competent communicators are careful to "code-switch" when moving between casual and formal modes of texting (Collister, 2018). (You'll find more on the skill of *code-switching* in Section 3.4).

Adaptability becomes especially challenging when communicating online. When you post on social media, for instance, it's likely you have multiple audiences in mind as you craft your message (Marder et al., 2016). If you've edited an update before posting because you knew how some followers would react, you've practiced adaptability —along with impression management, as described in Section 4.2.

Ability to Perform Skillfully

Once you have chosen the appropriate way to communicate, you have to perform that behavior effectively (Reich et al., 2022). In communication, as in other activities, practice is the key to skillful performance. Much of the information in *Interplay* will introduce you to new tools for communicating, and the activities at the end of each chapter will help you practice them.

Empathy/Perspective Taking

We develop the most effective messages when we understand and empathize with the other person's point of view (Nelson et al., 2017). Empathy, or perspective taking (explained in Section 5.4), is an essential skill partly because others may not express their thoughts and feelings clearly. And of course, it's not enough just to imagine another's perspective; it's vital to *communicate* that understanding through verbal and nonverbal responses (Kellas et al., 2021).

Cognitive Complexity

Cognitive complexity is the ability to construct a variety of different frameworks for viewing an issue (Dai, 2021). Imagine that a longtime friend never responded to a message from you, but you expected a response. It's possible your friend is offended by something you've done. Another possibility is that something upsetting has happened in another part of your friend's life. Or

perhaps nothing at all is wrong, and you're just being overly sensitive.

Researchers have found that a large number of constructs for interpreting the behavior of others leads to greater "conversational sensitivity," increasing the chances of acting in ways that will produce satisfying results (MacGeorge & Wilkum, 2012). Not surprisingly, research also shows a connection between cognitive complexity and empathy (Youngvorst & Jones, 2017). This makes sense: The more ways you have to understand others and interpret their behaviors, the more likely you are to see and communicate about the world from their perspective.

Watch and Discuss 1.2: "Struggles of Having a Friend with No Filter"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Identify a friend who seems to have "no filter" when it comes to self-monitoring.

   How would you evaluate that person's communication competence?

2. Are there times when having a filter hurts interpersonal communication? Discuss the pros and cons of self-

monitoring. (See Activity 4 at the end of the chapter to explore ethical dimensions of self-monitoring.)

Self-Monitoring

Psychologists use the term **self-monitoring** to describe the process of paying close attention to one's own behavior and using these observations to shape it. Self-monitors can consider their behavior from a detached viewpoint, allowing for observations such as:

> "I'm making a fool out of myself."
>
> "I'd better speak up now."
>
> "This approach is working well. I'll keep it up."

It's no surprise that self-monitoring generally increases one's effectiveness as a communicator (Day et al., 2002). The ability to ask, "How am I doing?"—and to change your behavior if the answer isn't positive—is a tremendous asset for communicators both in person (Wang et al., 2015) and online (Hall et al., 2018). And you probably know what it looks like *not* to self-monitor. Watch and Discuss 1.2 takes a humorous look at communicators who have "no filter."

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 1.1 **Outline the needs that communication satisfies.**

Communication is important for a variety of reasons. Besides satisfying practical needs, meaningful communication contributes to physical health, plays a major role in defining our identity, and forms the basis for our social relationships.

Q: Considering a representative 2-day period, identify some of the physical, identity, social, and practical needs you try to satisfy by communicating. How could you better meet those needs by improving your communication skills?

Objective 1.2 **Explain the interpersonal communication process, from its transactional nature to governing principles.**

Interpersonal communication is a complex process. The transactional model presented in this chapter shows that meanings are determined by the people who exchange messages, not in the messages themselves. Interpersonal communicators usually send and receive messages simultaneously, particularly in face-to-face exchanges.

Environment and noise affect the nature of interaction, as do the channels used to exchange messages.

Communication follows several principles. For instance, it is transactional, irreversible, and unrepeatable, and it can be intentional or unintentional. Messages also have both content and relational dimensions.

To understand the communication process, it is important to recognize and avoid several common misconceptions. More communication is not always better. Sometimes total understanding isn't as important as we might think. Even at its best, communication is not a panacea that will solve every problem. Effective communication is not a natural ability. Although some people have greater aptitude at communicating, everyone can learn to interact with others more competently.

Q: Apply the transactional model to a situation that illustrates the principles described in Section 1.2.3.

Objective 1.3 **Describe the characteristics of interpersonal versus impersonal communication.**

Interpersonal communication can be defined by the number of people interacting, or by the quality of interaction. In terms of quality, communication in interpersonal relationships is distinguished by uniqueness, interdependence, disclosure, and intrinsic rewards. Interpersonal communication is best understood in contrast to impersonal communication. Even close

interpersonal relationships have a mixture of deep, personal communication and mundane, impersonal interaction.

Q: In what ways are some of your interpersonal relationships impersonal, and vice versa?

Objective 1.4 **Identify characteristics of effective communication and competent communicators.**

Communication competency is the ability to be both effective and appropriate. There is no single ideal way to communicate. Flexibility and adaptability are characteristics of competent communicators, as are skill at performing behaviors, empathy and perspective taking, cognitive complexity, and self-monitoring. The good news is that communication competency can be learned.

Q: Identify interpersonal situations in which you communicate competently and those in which your competence is less than satisfactory. Based on these observations, identify goals for improving your interpersonal communication skills.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Reflection:** Since the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, working and learning remotely have become facts of life for many people. And as noted in the text, going out and socializing has become less of a priority for many Americans (Section 1.1). Take a moment to consider if and how reduced face-to-face communication has affected your ability to meet your physical, identity, social, and practical needs.
2. **Self-Appraisal:** Review the Focus on Research sidebar, "Building Relationships Before Doing Business" (in Section 1.3.2). When there's a job to be done, do you tend to be more task-oriented like the first example or relational-oriented like the second example? How is your patience for people with a different orientation? After you've made your self-appraisal, seek feedback from several people who are familiar with your work style. Consider whether their feedback points to something you want to work on (i.e., becoming more or less task-oriented in interpersonal interactions).
3. **Build Your Skill:** This chapter defines competent communication as *effective* and *appropriate* (Section 1.4.1). For each of the following scenarios, create a

response that is both effective (helps you achieve your goal) and appropriate (maintains the relationship and interpersonal goodwill).

   a. You're waiting at your favorite restaurant for your to-go order to be completed. They're clearly short-staffed, but your order was supposed to be ready ten minutes ago and you're in a hurry. The manager says, "Sorry for the delay."
   b. You would like to get together with two of your closest friends more often. The last few times you raised the issue, they said their calendar was awfully full.
   c. One of your family members tagged you on a social media post that you found embarrassing. This isn't the first time it's happened.

4. **Ethical Challenge:** Self-monitoring is a feature of communication competence (Section 1.4.2)—but can it be overdone? High self-monitoring sometimes leads to less-than-authentic communication that impedes relational intimacy (Wright et al., 2007). On the other hand, people who don't self-monitor are often "honest to a fault" and injure relationships. What is the ethical happy medium when it comes to self-monitoring?

Assessing Your Communication: How Interpersonal Are Your Relationships? (Personal Practice)

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

channel

Cognitive complexity

communication

communication competence

content dimension

environments

feedback

interpersonal communication

noise

relational dimension

self-monitoring

transactional communication

CHAPTER 1 Flashcards

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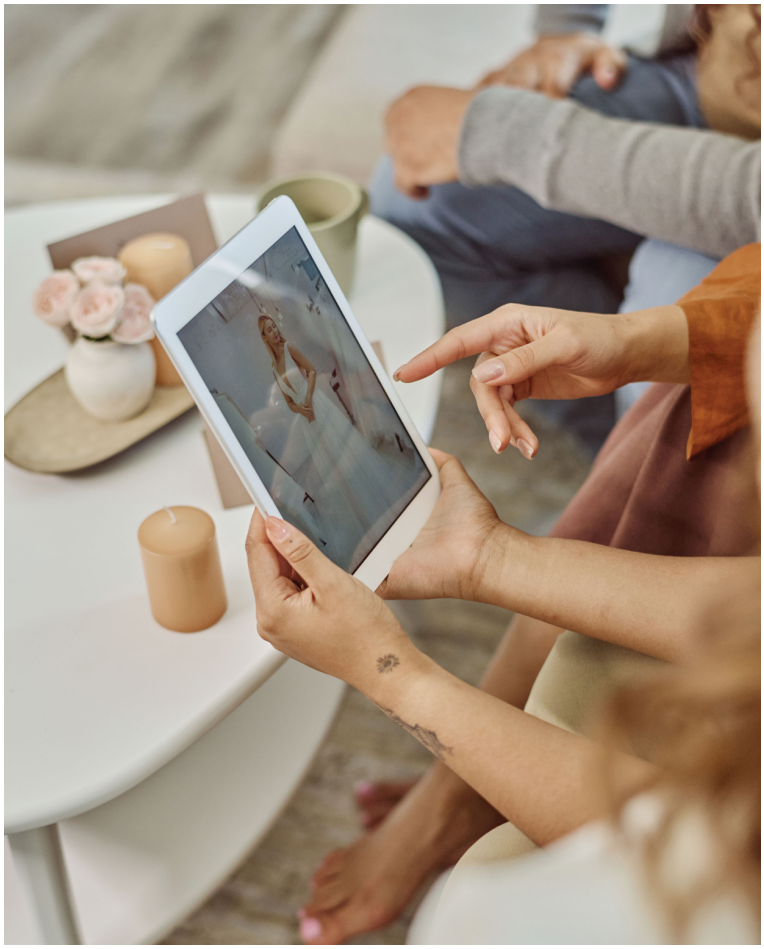
2
Mediated Interpersonal Communication

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **2.1 Identify the benefits and drawbacks of mediated communication.**
- **2.2 Distinguish between mediated interpersonal and masspersonal communication, and use each appropriately.**

2.3 Apply the principles of competence to your mediated interpersonal and masspersonal communication.

FOR MOST OF HISTORY, face-to-face communication was the foundation of interpersonal relationships. A medieval peasant knew only the small number of people who lived within a day's walk (Manchester, 1992). Centuries later, proximity still defined most relationships. As one historian noted, "You could not get too picky when you might meet only a handful of potential marriage partners in your entire life" (Coontz, 2005).

Proximity is still a powerful predictor of relationship formation and maintenance (Habinek et al., 2015). But technology can overcome spatial limitations in ways that earlier generations could have barely imagined. On your laptop or phone, you can chat across continents. At work, geographically distributed teams tackle jobs that would have been impossible to coordinate in earlier times. Romantic relationships often begin online, and partners keep them going even when separated by long distances.

Think of how many times you've texted, posted, messaged, blogged, emailed, tweeted, or video chatted during the past few days. These are all forms of **mediated communication**—any type of

communication occurring via a technological channel (Sherblom, 2020). **Social media** are a subset within this category: websites and applications that enable individual users to network and share content. Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn are examples of social media platforms (Facebook is still the industry giant with nearly 3 billion active users each month). Email and texting are mediated communication channels, but not social media because they don't involve networking and content sharing.

This chapter will give you a clear notion of how mediated communication operates in your relationships. In addition, it will discuss ways to use mediated channels to best accomplish your personal and relational goals.

"Goodnight Twitter.
Goodnight Instagram.
Goodnight Snapchat.
Goodnight Reddit.
Goodnight Tinder.
Goodnight Pinterest.
Goodnight Facebook..."

2.1 Mediated Communication: Pros and Cons

Dire predictions related to communication technologies have arisen throughout history. Almost 2,500 years ago, the philosopher Socrates declared that writing was inferior to speech. He warned that a written record "will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories" (Konnikova, 2012). Warnings were also sounded in the 19th century, soon after the invention of the telegraph. One critic's prediction resembles criticisms you might hear today about Twitter: "The constant diffusion of statements in snippets, the constant excitements of feeling unjustified by fact, the constant formation of hasty or erroneous opinions must … deteriorate the intelligence of all" (Phalen, 2015). Other worries emerged when telephones were a new technology. Would they replace in-person conversations? Wasn't it rude and intrusive to call and interrupt someone without warning? Holding a strange device to your head also seemed physically risky (LaFrance, 2015): Could it hurt your brain, or even explode during use?

Today those worries about commonplace technologies sound comical. But similar concerns arise with every innovation. Fortunately, scholarship sheds light on both the true costs and benefits of using various forms of communication technology.

2.1.1 Alienating or Connecting?

One of the most important debates regarding mediated communication is whether it's a source of alienation or connection. Does it create social distance or bring people together? There's evidence for both arguments.

Alienating Factors

As you read in Chapter 1, loneliness is one of today's greatest health threats. A comprehensive review showed that people lacking social connections are at a 29 percent higher risk for premature mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Excessive media use and loneliness often go hand in hand (Hunt et al., 2018).

Technology is most alienating when it's used as a substitute for face-to-face communication. There's a correlation between loneliness and what social scientists call a *preference for online social interaction* (Chen, 2019). Some people rely on online interaction because they don't have to respond in real time or manage the complexities of sending and interpreting nonverbal cues (Lundy & Drouin, 2016). Many teens would rather communicate with friends online than in person, and that has some parents concerned (Morris, 2018).

Frequent users of social media may become caught in a vicious cycle of alienation. Their preference for online interaction can lead to withdrawal from meaningful offline interaction, which leaves them feeling even more isolated (Phu & Gow, 2019). This negative spiral

can create problems in offline relationships at school and work, as unhappy communicators withdraw further from in-person relationships (Caplan, 2018). It's hard to say whether loneliness leads to a preference for online social interaction or vice versa (Tokunaga, 2016). Either way, the problem is potentially serious.

Watch and Discuss 2.1: "I Forgot My Phone"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. How do the smartphone intrusions in this video resemble those in your life?
2. How do these intrusions affect the quality of your relationships?

Connecting Factors

Steve Jobs, the late cofounder of Apple Inc., suggested that personal computers be renamed "*interpersonal* computers." He had a point: Research shows that mediated communication can enhance relationships.

This claim doesn't necessarily contradict the alienating factors described in the preceding section. In most cases, mediated

communication isn't so much a *replacement* for face-to-face as a *supplement*. Consider how mediated communication helps you stay in touch with friends and family members—many of whom would be outside your social orbit if it weren't for social media (Carvalho et al., 2015). Participants in one study said texting had given them an increased sense of connection with family members (Crosswhite et al., 2014). Social networking sites also make it possible to reconnect with old contacts (Ramirez et al., 2017). Trying to get back in touch with a former neighbor, a high school classmate, or a long-lost relative? With a little research, you can potentially track them down in ways that wouldn't have been possible for previous generations.

The value of digital communication became dramatically clear during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, when millions of people were physically isolated for months on end (Shufford et al., 2021).

One college student described how technology kept her connected while sheltering at home:

> … being on social media has made me feel like the world isn't so small. When I tweet about being sad or depressed, people send messages telling me that they're available to talk and that I'm not alone. I told a friend I know only through Twitter that I wanted to try planting. A week later, several packets of seeds and a card with instructions arrived in the mail. (Garrett, 2020)

Connecting digitally was transformed during the pandemic from a tool of convenience to a virtual lifeline (Juvonen et al., 2021). Many younger people taught older adults in their lives how to use social media and video chatting services, bridging the digital divide that had separated generations (Conger & Griffith, 2020). In so doing, those who were tech-savvy helped stave off feelings of loneliness and isolation for those who were quarantined. Video platforms like Zoom also kept many a business afloat during the pandemic, ushering in a "new normal" for working remotely (Parker et al., 2022). (See the At Work sidebar later in this chapter for tips on professional videoconferencing.)

Besides helping maintain existing relationships, mediated communication can make it easier to create new ones. Nearly two-thirds of teens say they have made new friends online (Lenhart, 2016). Many people who engage with online groups or gaming systems find themselves making friends with other users. This is particularly true for shy people, who find online communication less intimidating (Hammick & Lee, 2014). And in the business world, sites like LinkedIn connect candidates to job opportunities and encourage professional networking (Stern, 2022).

Mediated communication has also revolutionized the world of courtship and dating. Finding a compatible partner can be challenging, and online dating has many advantages (Vogels, 2020). Online dating services expand your dating pool beyond your offline network and help identify prospective partners with similar backgrounds and interests. Skeptics initially questioned whether relationships that started online could be successful in person. Research has largely put these concerns to rest (Rosenfeld, 2017). In one survey, more than one-third of the 19,000 married respondents said they had met their partners online (Cacioppo et al., 2013). Couples who meet online stay together about as much as those who meet in person, and those who stay together transition to marriage more quickly, and on average, report happier marriages.

2.1.2 Superficial or Meaningful?

Are relationships that are created or sustained only via social media necessarily superficial? Some users would dispute this view, claiming that mediated communication can contribute to meaningful relationships. Which is true?

"It says no one really knows who he is, but that he's got 400,000 followers on Twitter."

Mediated Communication as Superficial

Social scientists have argued that it's possible to sustain only about 150 relationships at a time (Dunbar, 2021). That figure has been termed "Dunbar's number" in recognition of the Oxford University anthropologist who established it. If you're lucky, you have an inner circle of about five "core" people and an additional layer of 10 to 15 close friends and family members (Bryant & Marmo, 2012). Beyond that lies a circle of roughly 35 reasonably strong contacts. That leaves about 100 more people to round out your group of meaningful

connections. You almost certainly don't have the time or energy to actively sustain relationships with many more people than that.

Dunbar's number is much smaller than the number of "friends" many people claim on social networking sites. One study compared the online exchanges of people with thousands of social media friends to those who identified smaller numbers of online relationships (Dunbar, 2012). The conclusion: regardless of how many online friends users claimed, they only actively maintained relationships with the same number of people—roughly 15. You may have a large number of acquaintances online, but it's probably a stretch to consider them close friends. Some scholars have suggested that seeking an unrealistically large number of social media friends might be compensation for low self-esteem (Lee et al., 2012). Moreover, having too many social media friends can backfire because people tend to befriend those who have fewer online friends than they do (Si et al., 2021).

Over-reliance on brief mediated messages can lead to superficial connections, even among true friends. MIT professor Sherry Turkle (2015) put it this way:

> I was taken aback when Stephen Colbert asked me a profound question during an appearance on his show. He said, "Don't all those little tweets, these little sips of online communication, add up to one big gulp of real conversation?" My answer was no. Many sips of connection don't add up to a gulp of conversation.

Respondents in one poll said that online connections "are becoming increasingly superficial" and that social media "is getting in the way of real-life friendships" (Knight, 2019). They regard less than a

quarter of their Facebook friendships as genuine, which may explain why a third of them wish they had more close friends.

Mediated Communication as Meaningful

Nobody would dispute that mediated communication can sometimes feel superficial. But that doesn't mean *all* of it is. In fact, online connections can have immense value.

Communication technologies can provide a meaningful way to connect with likeminded people. Discussion boards, blogs, and online forums may create a sense of virtual community among strangers (Pendry & Salvatore, 2015). Whether you're a follower of Premier League soccer, an avid environmentalist, or a devotee of punk rock, you can find kindred spirits online. What begins as a series of brief online exchanges with strangers can sometimes lead to valuable friendships. One sports fan offered this description:

> I've participated in a variety of blog sites for my favorite major league baseball team. One particular forum was small and welcoming, and over time we began to talk about our other hobbies and interests. Soon we were exchanging quips about our jobs and families (between innings, of course), and several of us decided to meet up at a game. I'm now connected to a dozen of these people on social networking sites and consider them good friends.

Mediated communication can also strengthen existing relationships by supplementing face-to-face interaction (Dainton & Myers, 2020). The theory of *media multiplexity* asserts that people enhance their close relationships by using a greater number of channels (Ledbetter, 2015). The stronger the bond, the more mediated channels you'll likely use in a relationship (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). Think of your

inner circle: you likely stay connected with them via text, phone, video chat, email, and several social media platforms.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Maintaining Long-Distance Romances Through Texting

If you've been in a romantic relationship with a partner hundreds of miles away, you know that brief text messages like "Good morning, sweetie" can mean a lot. A research team led by Susan Holtzman investigated the role of text messaging and other forms of mediated communication in long-distance relationships (LDRs).

More than 600 emerging adults (ages 18–25) were asked about their mediated communication habits in romantic relationships. Not surprisingly, participants in LDRs engaged in more frequent video calling, voice calling, and texting compared to those in geographically close relationships (GCRs). More specifically, frequent and responsive texting predicted significantly greater relational satisfaction among participants in LDRs, but not in GCRs. Those in GCRs were more likely to use frequent voice calls to maintain their relationships.

Long-distance relationships were once seen as difficult to sustain, and texting was viewed as a "lightweight" mode of communication. This study suggests that frequent text messages can help LDRs not only survive but thrive. As the researchers note, even the most advanced technologies will struggle to compete with a simple and well-timed text saying, "I'm thinking about you."

Holtzman, S. Kushlev, K., Wozny, A., & Godard, R. (2021). Long-distance texting: Text messaging is linked with higher relationship satisfaction in long-distance relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 38,* 3543–3565.

Even relatively superficial communication can enhance important relationships. Communicating via text messaging can help work colleagues form more personal relationships (McGloin et al., 2022). It can also help maintain long-distance romances, as described in the Focus on Research sidebar in this section. Social networking sites give family and close friends the chance to keep up with each other through status updates: "How did the interview go?" or "I've got dinner covered" (Abel et al., 2021). Even regular Snapchat exchanges can help maintain close relationships (Kahlow et al., 2020).

Scholars use the term **weak ties** to describe less-personal relationships typified by infrequent communication (Sprecher, 2022). Although the term "weak" sounds negative, these ties can offer strong rewards (Volpe, 2019). On a practical level, networking with contacts beyond your inner circle can be useful. Your second cousin might alert you to a job prospect. A neighbor might recommend a reliable auto mechanic or a gentle dentist. Moreover, researchers describe "the surprising power of weak ties" to stave off loneliness and enhance feelings of well-being (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). In short, the more weak ties you have, the happier you're likely to feel.

One of the primary ways to stay connected in weak-tie relationships is through social media (Pennington & Hall, 2021). You can probably recall putting out an ISO (in search of) message online and getting

helpful recommendations from grade-school friends, former workmates, or your great aunt. One columnist wryly notes that social networking "has changed social life by keeping weak connections on life support forever" (Beck, 2019). Put more positively, social media allows you to stay in touch with people who would otherwise remain distant relatives or long-lost friends.

2.1.3 Unhealthy or Healthy?

Some concerns about mediated communication go beyond the question of superficiality. Critics argue that digital communication is downright unhealthy. Others respond by pointing out how connecting electronically can actually improve health. Which claims are valid?

Unhealthy Aspects

Googling "dangers of social media" reveals a pervasive concern that mediated communication is a health threat. One addiction expert stated that giving children smartphones is like handing them a gram of cocaine (Pells, 2017). In fact, social scientists use the term "addiction" to describe problematic use of smartphones (Olson et al., 2022). One study found that cell phone addiction increases anxiety and leads to greater difficulty with face-to-face interaction (Allred & Atkin, 2020).

Overuse of mediated communication can take a toll on physical and mental health (Lee et al., 2022). At the most basic level, too much time online can lead to sleep deprivation (Tandon et al., 2020). Smartphone users often stay up late hours checking their devices, driven by FOMO—the fear of missing out (Hunt et al., 2018). People who take time off from social media report better moods, less anxiety, and increased face-to-face interaction (Carey, 2019; Lambert et al., 2022).

Whistleblower Frances Haugen revealed insider studies about Instagram by its parent company Facebook (Allyn, 2021). These tech giants knew for years that social media had detrimental effects on its young users. About 32 percent of teen girls in the revealed data said that when they felt bad about their bodies, Instagram made them feel worse. There were also links between social media use and both eating disorders and suicidal thoughts. These revelations confirmed earlier studies linking heavy reliance on mediated communication with depression, loneliness, and social anxiety (Caplan, 2018; Coyne et al., 2019), especially among teenage girls (Twenge et al., 2018).

Some critics have challenged the cause-and-effect relationship between mediated communication and lack of well-being. For instance, one study followed social media users for years and found that for adolescent girls, depression leads to social media use rather than vice versa (Heffer et al., 2019). This implies that obsessive technology use might be a symptom rather than a cause of mental health issues. Nevertheless, there's a strong argument for carefully monitoring mental health symptoms among teenagers, particularly those who are heavy users of social media. The Dark Side of

Communication box details one researcher's sobering conclusions about the relationship between smartphone use and mental health issues.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

The Effects of Smartphone Use Among Teens

Jean Twenge has spent her career studying generational trends, from Baby Boomers until today. She's dubbed those born since 1995 iGen because they're the first generation to spend their entire adolescence in the smartphone era. (This generation is more commonly known as Generation Z.)

Twenge analyzed large data sets collected across decades and noticed disturbing patterns (Twenge, 2017; Twenge et al., 2019). Compared with teens in previous generations, Generation Z members:

- hang out less with their friends;
- go to fewer parties and on fewer dates;
- get less sleep; and
- are more unhappy, lonely, and depressed.

Twenge argues that today's teens spend much of their time "on their phone, in their room, alone and often distressed." On the positive side, Gen Z is physically safer than previous generations, in part because they go out less and engage in fewer overtly risky behaviors. But Twenge claims that they've

undergone some fundamental changes in the way they communicate and relate with others.

Some critics have challenged Twenge's methods and conclusions (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Others concur with her, arguing that smartphones are a source of social alienation and other problems (Turkle, 2015; James & Weinstein, 2022). If you're a member of Gen Z, consider whether smartphone use is taking a toll on your mental and physical health. If so, you might want to commit to balancing your media use with plenty of face-to-face interaction with your friends, family, and loved ones.

Other health hazards associated with mediated communication are cyberstalking and harassment. Of course, surveillance and aggression existed before the internet—but mediated channels allow for unprecedented access to victims. Cyberstalking and harassment can take many forms: a barrage of unwanted texts and emails; messages with poems and song lyrics suggesting greater intimacy than exists; lewd photos and threatening posts; spreading rumors and falsehoods. It's no surprise that these kinds of behaviors have harmful consequences for victims including anxiety, panic attacks, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Stevens et al., 2021). See the Dark Side of Communication in Chapter 13 on the related issue of cyberbullying and its effects on well-being. (See also Activity 1 at the end of this chapter for a self-appraisal about negative effects of mediated communication.)

Healthy Aspects

Rigorous analysis of existing research reveals that many of the fears surrounding social media are overstated (Popper, 2020; Schemer et al., 2021). When used in balanced ways, mediated communication can provide the opportunity to develop and maintain social connectedness. That connectedness is associated with mental and physical health (Bekalu et al., 2019) and a greater sense of well-being (Taylor & Bazarova, 2021).

Virtual communities can be an important source of social support and feedback on issues ranging from illness (Rains et al., 2015), to suicide prevention (Luxton et al., 2011), and substance use (Schwebel & Orban, 2023). That's especially important in dealing with potentially stigmatizing or isolating issues. Because online support group participants are similar yet relatively anonymous, these venues can offer help in ways that make strangers seem like close friends.

This was true for Brad, who was struggling to stay sober from alcohol. He describes how online support saved his life:

> I began to get e-mails, phone calls, text messages, tweets and other digital notes from people around the world. Some offered kind words. Some offered support. Many people shared their own stories of addiction. In my darkest times, these notes would come. And always, without question, they pulled me back from the brink.
>
> Many of these messages were from people I have known for years. Another handful came from childhood friends and people I'd grown up with. Some I had known well; many I had not. Others came from complete strangers. I have no idea how they found me.

> AA keeps me sane. But social media got me there. Without that far-reaching network of people—friends and strangers alike—I wouldn't be here today. (Adler & Proctor, 2017)

It's worth noting that participants in a study of 12-step programs said they preferred face-to-face meetings to online versions (Barrett & Murphy, 2021). They viewed videoconferencing as a "valuable supplemental tool" for substance use recovery, but not a replacement for in-person gatherings. This captures a theme running through much of this section: mediated communication is best understood as a supplement, not a substitute, for face-to-face interaction.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Social Media Detox

How long could you last without access to social media? What effect would it have on your disposition and social life?

Participants in a study were instructed not to use social media for seven days. Apps were installed on their smartphones to monitor their online behavior. Researchers also checked in with the participants each day to see how they were doing. To no one's surprise, most of the participants exhibited withdrawal symptoms, such as craving and boredom. A substantial number (59 percent) broke down and used social media at least once. Participants also said they felt pressure from their peers to return to social media.

In a different study, participants who had been off social media for at least six months talked about their experiences. Most said they felt "out of the loop" with friends and family, as

well as with news of the world. They also feared professional consequences of not being networked online. Nevertheless, most were happy with their decision to detox. They said their interactions with close relational partners improved and they stopped feeling the pressures of online social comparison. (See the photo/caption about NFL player A.J. Brown in this section for a similar appraisal.)

These studies offer scientific support for what most users already know: Communicating with others via social media is a basic part of most people's daily lives. The challenge is learning how to use social media without it taking a toll on your personal well-being and relational success. That might require the occasional social media detox.

Pennington, N. (2021). Quitting social media: A qualitative exploration of communication outcomes. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, 22*, 30–38.
Stieger, S., & Lewetz, D. (2018). A week without using social media: Results from an ecological momentary intervention study using smartphones. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 21*, 618–624.

2.1.4 The Bottom Line

What's the takeaway from all this research? Does mediated communication bring people together or isolate them? Does it foster meaningful relationships or make them more superficial? Does it enhance or reduce mental health? One psychologist offers this observation:

> For some of us, social media will be a lifeline—connecting us to friends, family or strangers in times of need. For others, it will be a landmine—exposing us to triggering content or harassment. For most, it will be both, depending on when and how we use it. (Nesi, 2022)

The following are suggestions for keeping mediated communication as more lifeline than landmine.

Moderation

As with many things in life, balance is vital to the healthy use of social media. Instagram co-founder Kevin Systrom put it in everyday terms: "Like anything—whether it's food, or drink—moderation is key" (Gibbs, 2018). Studies hint that there's a "Goldilocks" effect to the right amount of mediated communication—neither too little nor too much (Denworth, 2019). Overusing social media appears to damage mental health and face-to-face relationships (Andreassen, 2015). On the other hand, *underusing* mediated communication can negatively affect relationships (Pedrero-Perez et al., 2019). After all, going offline is likely to cut off access to social connections and support.

Active Versus Passive Use

Along with the amount of time people spend in mediated communication, the *way* they use mediated channels can shape whether the outcomes are beneficial or harmful. For example, passive consumers of social media suffer more than active ones. Perpetually scrolling through others' content without interacting or

creating your own can become unhealthy (Verduyn et al., 2017). By contrast, social media users who create their own content generally feel more connected and better about themselves—because they're using the sites for interpersonal reasons rather than as a point of passive social comparison.

Known Versus Unknown Communicators

Another difference lies in the type of people with whom users communicate. Social media users who interact with those they know offline fare better on depression measures than those who follow mainly strangers (Shensa et al., 2018). Phone calls and texting are positively correlated with well-being, while online gaming has the opposite effect—because the former is more interpersonal (Liu et al., 2019). In addition, having extended family who are available to you online decreases psychological distress (Hampton, 2019).

Any ill effects that may come from using mediated channels appear to be smaller than some critics originally claimed. After completing an expansive analysis of 226 published studies, communication scholar Jeff Hancock and his associates found that the impact of social media on well-being is statistically significant but small (Hancock et al., 2019). "Using social media is essentially a tradeoff," Hancock explained. "You get very small advantages for your well-being that come with very small costs" (Denworth & Waves, 2019).

New and ongoing research will continue to explore both the beneficial and the harmful effects of evolving communication technology. Researchers hope to learn how other technological

factors may play a role in wellbeing and successful relationships (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). For now, it's clear that mediated communication can be a tool for enhancing interpersonal relationships—as long as it's monitored and not used to extremes.

NFL receiver A.J. Brown says, "Since I got off social media, I've been stress-free, enjoying my moment, my life, the things that matter to me instead of building stress from looking at things or looking at other people" (Pompei, 2022). ***How can taking breaks from social media be good for your mental health?*** View larger image

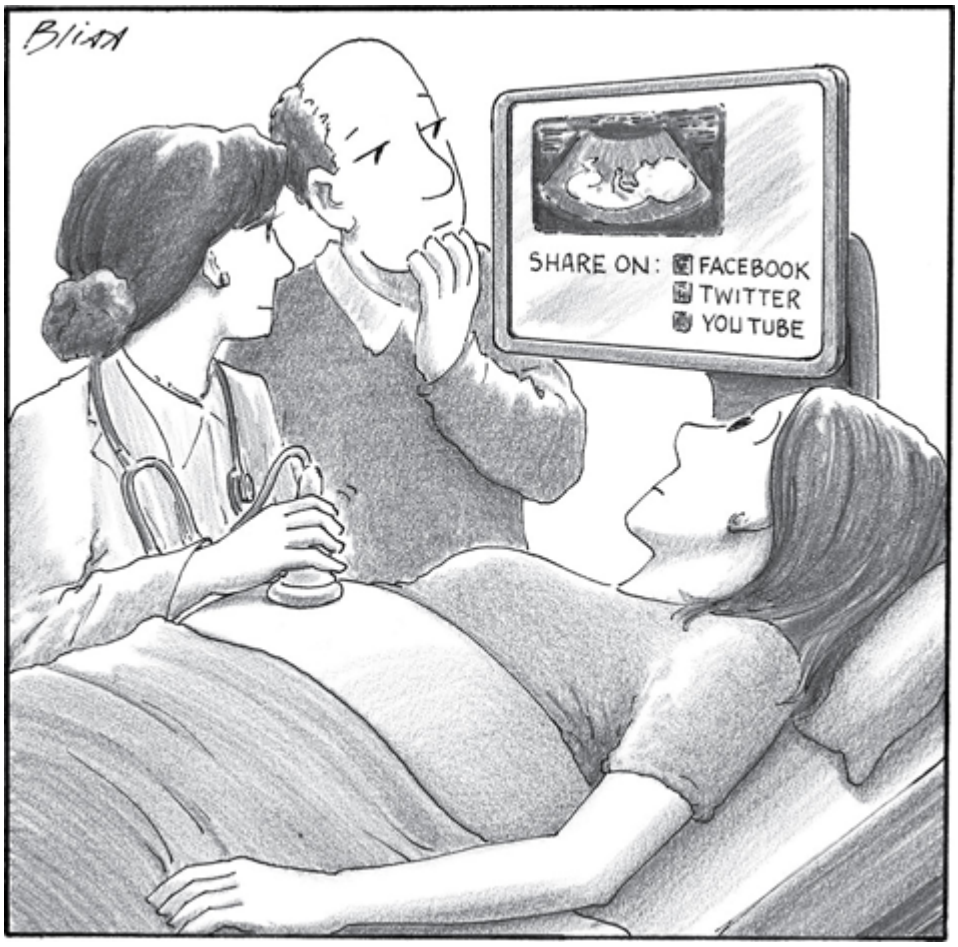
2.2 Mediated Interpersonal Versus Masspersonal Communication

Until recently, nobody would have confused interpersonal and mass communication. Individuals connected with one another in person, by written correspondence, and by telephone. By contrast, newspapers, magazines, and television were aimed at audiences numbering in the thousands, or even millions. Things are different today, as you'll now see.

2.2.1 Hallmarks of Mediated Interpersonal Communication

Imagine sharing photos of an unborn baby on Twitter. That would certainly be personal, but you probably agree that it isn't *interpersonal* in the sense we've been using the term. So, what features make a mediated interaction feel more interpersonal? It's not about the channel or the app (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). For example, some social media messages are generic: "Congrats!" Others are more specific and personal: "Remember our talk on the

camping trip: I believe in you." Here are some features that help make mediated communication more interpersonal.



Personal Content

There's a clear difference between reminiscing with a friend and texting with a customer service rep about your phone bill. As you read in Chapter 1, disclosure of personal information is one measure of a relationship's interpersonal nature. Not all personal disclosures are positive. A private message saying, "I'm embarrassed to be

around you when you drink" would convey personal information but might weaken the relationship.

Personal messages don't have to be deeply revealing. Oversharing online can be obnoxious and awkward (Agger, 2015). But sooner or later, you need to get personal to make interpersonal communication happen. Chapter 4 includes more information about the role of self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships.

Small Number of Identifiable Receivers

A public speech is fundamentally different from a personal conversation or from the kind of interactions that go on around the dinner table. That's because messages shared with large audiences tend to be more generic than those exchanged among a small number of communicators.

The same logic applies in mediated channels. Think again about the example of tweeting an ultrasound image of a baby in utero. Sharing this type of news would feel more interpersonal if the parents-to-be crafted individual messages to close friends and family, tailoring each to suit the recipients ("You're going to be an uncle!" or "Thanks for your advice about choosing a doctor").

Mutual Obligation

Whether it's in-person or mediated, interpersonal communication calls for an exchange of messages (Knapp & Daly, 2011). Imagine

running into a friend who says, “My day has been crazy … how about you?” You’d know better than to walk away without responding. That would break the unspoken rule that interpersonal communicators have a sense of mutual awareness and obligation to one another (Burleson, 2010).

Just as in offline settings, mediated interpersonal communication involves this sense of mutual obligation. If you pose a question via text message or ask for a reply to your email, you’re likely to feel hurt if there’s no response. Chapter 13 explains why being ignored can be hurtful, even devastating, regardless of the channel.

Expectation of Privacy

When you share your thoughts and feelings in an interpersonal conversation (whether via phone, via text, or in person), you can reasonably expect that those messages won’t become public. In fact, you’d probably be offended if the recipients were to broadcast your messages without asking permission. Interpersonal communication tends to involve feelings of trust: You are choosing to open up or disclose to a particular person.

When you’re texting your roommate, facetiming with your family, or sending private Snaps to your significant other, you’re using technology for interpersonal purposes. But some personal mediated content feels more like mass communication. The next section explores this intersection.

2.2.2 Hallmarks of Masspersonal Communication

The boundary between mass and interpersonal communication can be fuzzy. Accordingly, scholars have coined the term **masspersonal communication** to characterize how individuals use mediated communication to reach large audiences in ways that forge and sustain personal connections (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018; see also Choi & Choung, 2021). Figure 2.1 shows how social media and other mass channels can be used for personal communication.

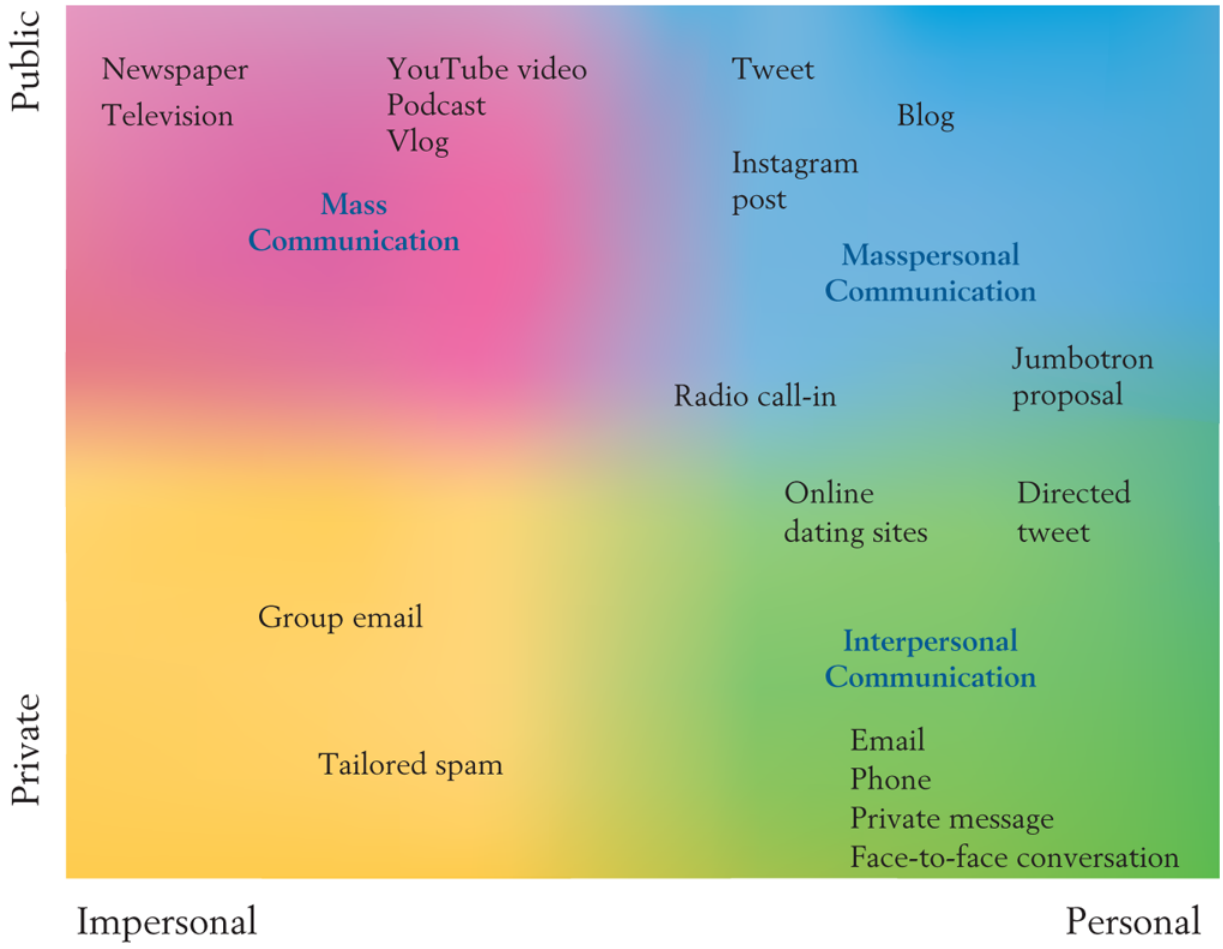


FIGURE 2.1 Examples of Mass, Mediated Interpersonal, and Masspersonal Communication Adapted from O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018 View larger image

Personal Content

Both inter*personal* and mass*personal* communication involve personal content. Your masspersonal updates might range from superficial ("I got all the classes I hoped for!") to deeply significant ("Just learned my beloved grandma entered hospice care. I don't know how I'll get along without her love and support."). Either way, a masspersonal message is about you; it's personal.

Message boards are a good example of how mass and interpersonal communication combine. They have elements of mass communication because they're available to large audiences; but they also have a personal dimension. Regulars may call each other by name and disclose details of their lives, even though they've never met in person.

Larger Audience

Masspersonal communication is a useful way to keep your extended social network informed about your life events, both big and small. Move across the country? Ace a test? Make pancakes shaped like cartoon characters for your nieces and nephews? With a few clicks you can send this information to anybody and everybody you know. Sharing these masspersonal updates—and scanning your own newsfeed for updates from friends and family—is an easy and

powerful tool for maintaining your relationships (Foster & Thorson, 2016). Imagine how much more difficult keeping in touch was before the advent of social media.

Masspersonal messages have the potential to reach audiences far greater than you might imagine. In fact, most people are aware of only around 25 percent of their actual social media audience (Bernstein et al., 2013). It's unlikely that most of the TikTok posters who have several million followers ever imagined that their videos would reach such a large audience. Even with a more modest online presence, it may be that some of your viewers are social media lurkers who like to follow you without creating or interacting with content (Sun et al., 2014). And there's the possibility that your immediate followers might repost your messages to their networks.

Sometimes having a larger audience can be gratifying; other times, it can be humiliating. Members of your personal network might broadcast not only your amazing feats but your embarrassing blunders to a wider audience. Misguided social media statements or jokes about hating work or playing hooky have gotten people fired.

Less Mutual Obligation

Masspersonal content doesn't carry the same level of obligation to respond that you'd expect when sending or receiving a private message. Think about the newsfeeds you follow: You probably don't respond to every post you see. After all, the posts weren't directed specifically at you, and many probably weren't even relevant. When you are the one broadcasting information on social media, you may

have an imagined audience in mind. But what if some of your followers didn't happen to see your message?

The frequency and nature of your messages will influence the level of response. It's unrealistic to expect your followers to reach out approvingly after seeing the umpteenth photo of your adorable puppy or favorite sports team. On the other hand, many masspersonal messages call for *some* response (French & Bazarova, 2017). You would probably feel unappreciated if nobody reacted to your posts about finishing your first marathon or getting accepted to graduate school.

Even with less momentous news, users can develop a *response threshold*—or desired reaction size—they use to decide if their masspersonal posts are successful (Carr et al., 2018). Likes and other brief reactions are often sufficient: They're a form of social currency that say, "I acknowledge and approve of what you said" (Sumner et al., 2018). If you read something even mildly notable, sending a quick Like or comment can nourish the relationship (Scissors et al., 2016).

Low Expectation of Privacy

You don't expect your thoughts to become public when you leave a voicemail message or send a text, and you would probably be upset if someone were to snoop through your phone's contact list. By contrast, it's best to assume that every masspersonal message you broadcast on social media will be public (Burkell et al., 2013).

The more public your social media channel, the less control you have over who sees your messages and what they do with them. That may be fine: You'd probably be delighted to get hundreds or thousands of views of your YouTube appeal for donations to help a local family in distress. Or your tweet encouraging volunteers to show up at a protest march. On the other hand, you might be embarrassed if your sarcastic post about one of your professors reached a larger audience, including your professor.

While purely interpersonal messages are obviously important, masspersonal communication is sometimes the ideal approach. Imagine that an old friend from high school posted an engagement photo on Instagram. Expressing "Congratulations!" on your friend's public page might be the most desirable response. A private text

might feel intrusive if you haven't spoken to this friend in years. Moreover, public channels offer a way to advertise your thoughts and feelings. In fact, you probably have a larger audience in mind as you craft a masspersonal post—otherwise, you would send it privately.

Masspersonal messages might seem shallow, but they have the potential to strengthen interpersonal relationships and mobilize social support. Consider one example: A friend we know posted a Facebook status update with the news that her beloved dog had passed away, "crossing the rainbow bridge" as she phrased it. The masspersonal post became the starting point for a tidal wave of one-on-one interpersonal support. Many friends posted fond memories: "I'll never forget the time your dog stole a sandwich right out of my hand and ran off with it. It was so funny! We'll miss her." Closer friends and family reached out via phone, video chat, and text message. Some stopped by to give a hug and bring food to her house, imagining she wasn't in the mood to cook.

Masspersonal posts can be a great way to connect with your network at large, but they aren't well suited as a primary means of communicating with the people who are close to you, especially on important topics (McEwan et al., 2018). Imagine learning about your best friend's engagement via a social media post. You'd probably feel hurt and angry, figuring that you deserved a private, one-on-one disclosure before the news went masspersonal. Some scholars have concluded that masspersonal communication, while useful, is "simply not comparable to having a conversation" (Hall, 2018). Table 2.1 summarizes the main similarities and differences between mediated interpersonal and masspersonal communication.

TABLE 2.1 Characteristics of Mediated Interpersonal Versus Masspersonal Communication

Mediated Interpersonal Communication	Masspersonal Communication
Personal content	Personal content
Small number of receivers	Larger audience
High obligation to respond	Lower obligation to respond
High expectation of privacy	Lower expectation of privacy

Choosing between interpersonal and masspersonal channels can make a big difference in how your messages are received, and in the consequences that follow. Making the right decisions is one element of communicative competence. The following section explores competence in more detail. (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for a reflection on your use of interpersonal/masspersonal communication.)

2.3 Competence in Mediated Communication

Effective mediated communication requires the principles of competence outlined in Chapter 1: asking yourself "What are my options?"; "Which one(s) are best suited for this situation?"; and "How can I use the approach I select most skillfully?" Along with these considerations, competent mediated communication has its own set of principles.

2.3.1 Consider the Channel(s)

What's the best communication channel: Video chat? Texting? Email? Social media? Face-to-face? You can answer this question by pausing for a moment to think about all the channels you could choose to say "I love you," "I quit," or "I'll pick up dinner tonight." (Really, pause and make a list.) Which one is best? Of course, the answer is "It depends" on a host of factors. Here are some channel attributes to consider when making your choices.

Richness

Social scientists use the term **richness** to describe the abundance of nonverbal cues that add clarity to a verbal message (Sherblom, 2020). **Leanness** describes messages that carry less information due to a lack of nonverbal cues. As you'll read in Chapter 7, face-to-face communication abounds with nonverbal messages that give communicators information about the meanings of one another's words. By comparison, most mediated channels are leaner. (See Figure 2.2.)

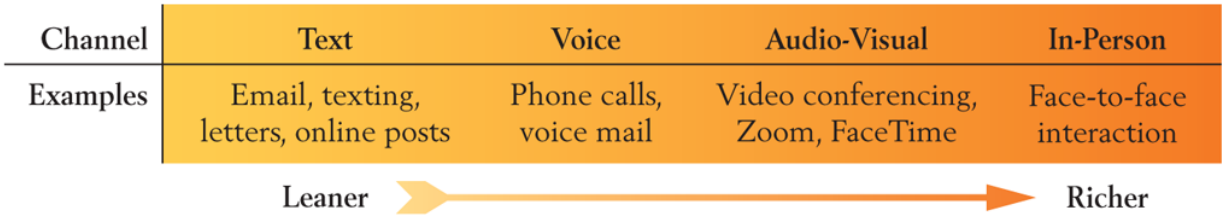


FIGURE 2.2 Leanness–Richness Spectrum of Communication Channels View larger image

There are times when a lean message is the best route to take. Maybe you don't want the receiver to hear the quiver in your voice, see the sweat on your forehead, or notice the clothing you're wearing. Moreover, lean messages communicate less information about communicators' personal features. One study found that the text-only format of most online messages can bring people closer by minimizing the perception of differences due to gender, social class, race or ethnicity, and age (Rains & Tsetsi, 2017). When you want people to focus on what you're saying rather than your appearance, leaner communication can be advantageous.

On the other hand, leaner channels can make it harder to interpret a message with confidence. Your ironic remarks and attempts at humor can easily be misunderstood. Adding phrases such as "just kidding" or an emoji like 😀 can add some richness, but your sincerity could still be interpreted as sarcasm by those who can't see your face or hear your voice. That may explain why richer channels like videoconferencing are associated with less interpersonal distress than leaner channels like text-based social media (Benjamin & Wang, 2022).

The leanness of some mediated messages also presents another problem, especially when communicators aren't well acquainted. Without nonverbal cues, online communicators can create idealized—and sometimes unrealistic—images of one another. As you'll read in Chapters 4 and 7, the absence of nonverbal cues allows communicators to manage their identities carefully. After all, it's a world without bad breath, unsightly blemishes, or stammering responses. Such conditions encourage participants to engage in what scholars call **hyperpersonal communication**, accelerating the discussion of personal topics and relational development beyond what normally happens in face-to-face interaction (Walther & Whitty, 2021). Online communicators self-disclose at higher rates and share more emotions than they would in person, often leading to a hastened (and perhaps premature) sense of relational intimacy.

The long-running series *Catfish: The TV Show* offers vivid illustrations of the relationship between lean channels and hyperpersonal communication. Many of the "catfishers" in the show communicate primarily through text-based messages, which have

been shown to create more social attraction than video calls (Antheunis et al., 2020). This leads to hyperpersonal relational development, with catfish victims often professing love for a person they've never met—or in some cases never seen. Show creator Nev Schulman says the best way to avoid getting catfished is to demand communication through richer channels, such as synchronous video chatting (Hurwitz, 2020).

Catfish: The TV Show spotlights people who fall in love through mediated channels. After meeting in person, some are unpleasantly surprised to discover extreme misrepresentation. The lean channels used by many catfishers make it easier to engage in hyperpersonal communication and relational intimacy. ***What steps can you take to avoid idealizing your online partners?*** View larger image

Synchronicity

Communication that occurs in real time is **synchronous**: think in-person conversations or online chats. By contrast, **asynchronous communication** occurs when there's a lag between receiving and responding to messages. Voice mail messages are asynchronous. So are "snail mail" letters, emails, and Tweets.

The asynchronous nature of most mediated messages makes them fundamentally different from face-to-face synchronous communication. Most obviously, asynchronous messages give you the choice of not responding at all: You can ignore certain social media posts, often without much fallout. But avoidance isn't a good option if the person who wants an answer gets you on the phone or confronts you in person.

Asynchronous channels give you the chance to edit your reply. You can mull over the wording, or even ask others for advice about what to say. Toward that end, asynchronous channels offer a less risky method of communication than having to come up with immediate answers (Ledbetter & Herbert, 2022). On the other hand, delaying a response to an asynchronous message can send a message of its own, intentionally or not ("I wonder why she hasn't texted me back?").

Asynchronous communication can be useful when emotions run high (Bulow et al., 2019). Channels like email can sometimes help you slow down and calm down, as long as you don't feel compelled to send a message immediately. You can read and possibly reconsider what you've written before saying something that might only make

matters worse. This extra time is especially helpful for partners who are otherwise satisfied in their relationship (Kashian & Walther, 2018).

Asynchronous channels can also be a good way to apologize. You can search for the right words without having to confront the other person, at least in the moment. Text messaging "I'm sorry, can we chat later" or "I really messed up this morning" can serve as a form of damage control after an argument.

@WORK

Communicating Professionally via Video

Nearly 60 percent of U.S. employees whose work can be done from home now work there, either all or part of the time (Parker et al., 2022). That means they conduct much of their business via video conferencing, using platforms such as Zoom, Teams, Skype, or Webex.

As you likely know from experience, there are better and worse ways to use these tools. Here are some one-word pro tips for communicating professionally online:

- **Mute.** When you're not talking, hit the mute button. That way other participants won't hear your dog barking, phone ringing, or other background noise. (BTW, it's a good idea to video from a quiet space so those distractions don't interfere when you're unmuted, too.)

- **Equipment.** If you Zoom or Skype frequently, it might be wise to invest in a high-quality camera, headset, and video light. Ask trusted colleagues how well they can see or hear you online to determine if you need to upgrade.
- **Background.** Admit it: When you're on a video call, you scrutinize what's going on behind the people you're viewing. Make sure your setting is uncluttered, attractive, and non-distracting—or consider using a virtual background.
- **Appearance.** Video conferences are often more casual than face-to-face meetings—but people will still notice if you're dressed sloppily or poorly groomed. Plus you'll feel better about yourself if you spruce up a bit. Nothing formal needed—just professional.
- **Feedback.** It may be tempting to turn off your video feed so others can't see what you're doing during a meeting—but consider how you've felt when speaking to blank screens. When possible, keep your video on and offer nonverbal feedback such as head nodding and eye contact—and perhaps some emojis to respond positively while others are talking.

These tips may seem basic and even obvious—but surely you know how often they're violated. Professional communicators bring their best to every meeting, regardless of the medium.

Permanence

What happens in a face-to-face conversation is transitory. By contrast, text, photos, and video can be stored indefinitely and forwarded to others. The permanence of digital messages can be a plus (Ozkul & Humphreys, 2015). For instance, you can save and share the smartphone photos of your once-in-a-lifetime encounter with your favorite celebrity. And if your boss emails you saying it's okay to come in late on Monday morning, you're covered if complaints are later raised about your tardy arrival.

There can also be a downside to the enduring nature of digital messages, however. It's bad enough to blurt out a private thought or lash out in person, but at least there's no permanent record of your indiscretion. By contrast, a regrettable text message, email, or web posting can be archived virtually forever. Even worse, it can be retrieved and forwarded in nightmarish ways. As one scholar warned, "It's going to be out there for a long time" (Neubaum, 2022).

Some mediated platforms are designed to thwart message permanence. Snapchat is the most popular of these time-limited instant messaging services (Piwek & Joinson, 2016), with content typically disappearing within 10 seconds. The ephemeral nature of Snapchat is why some users prefer it for messages they don't want to be permanent. About half the respondents in one study said they had sent drunk photos via Snapchat—and between 13 percent and 20 percent admitted sending snaps involving sexting or "legally questionable activities" (Utz et al., 2015).

Many people are quick to assume that richer, more synchronous, and less permanent channels are ideal in all situations, because they more closely resemble face-to-face communication. But by now, you should realize that different situations and communicators call for different approaches.

2.3.2 Be Careful What You Post

A quick scan of social networking home pages shows that many users post text and images about themselves that could prove embarrassing in some contexts: “Here I am just before my DUI arrest”; “This is me in Cancun on spring break.” This is not the sort of information most people would be eager to show a prospective employer or certain family members.

Some incautious posts can have serious consequences. One example is the practice of “sexting”—sharing explicit photos of oneself or others via mediated channels. One meta-analysis found that 38 percent of emerging adults (ages 18–29) had sent a sexting message, and nearly 42 percent had received one (Mori et al., 2020). In another study, nearly two-thirds of the more than 1,600 college students surveyed said they had sent sexually suggestive texts or photos (Winkelman et al., 2014). Even more disturbing, 31 percent shared these private communications with a third party. The impulsive message or post that seems harmless at the time can haunt you for a lifetime.

Respect Privacy Boundaries

It's usually fine to repost, retweet, or otherwise share masspersonal messages that are clearly aimed at large audiences. After all, senders use public spaces with little expectation of privacy. That may not be the case in semiprivate channels. For example, relatives who post photos and names of their children in your family's news feed probably don't want strangers to know these details. And it's easy to imagine how offended and angry you would be if some of your personal emails and texts went viral. If in doubt, it's best to ask the sender whether it's okay to share a message.

Keep Your Tone Civil

If you've ever posted a snide comment on a blog, shot back a nasty reply to a text or instant message, or forwarded an embarrassing email, you know that it can be easier to behave badly when the target of your message isn't right in front of you. (See the Watch and Discuss video in this section.)

The tendency to transmit messages without considering their consequences is called **disinhibition** (Scott et al., 2022). Disinhibition is far more likely in mediated channels than in face-to-face contact (Casale et al., 2015), and also when written anonymously (Nitschinsk et al., 2022). Sometimes communicators take disinhibition to the extreme, blasting off angry—even vicious—emails, text messages, and blog posts. Here is the account of one writer who was the target of an obscenity-filled rant in the early days

of online communication. It highlights how the internet encourages disinhibition that wouldn't be tolerable in face-to-face communication.

> No one had ever said something like this to me before, and no one could have said this to me before: In any other medium, these words would be, literally, unspeakable. The guy couldn't have said this to me on the phone, because I would have hung up and not answered if the phone rang again, and he couldn't have said it to my face, because I wouldn't have let him finish. … I suppose the guy could have written me a nasty letter: He probably wouldn't have used the word "rectum," though, and he probably wouldn't have mailed the letter; he would have thought twice while he was addressing the envelope. But the nature of email is that you don't think twice. You write and send. (Seabrook, 1994)

One way to behave better online is to ask yourself a simple question before you send, post, or broadcast: Would you deliver the same message to the recipient in person? If your answer is no, then you might want to think twice before sending. (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter for an ethical challenge about anonymous social media posts.)

Watch and Discuss 2.2: "Women in Sports 'Face' Harassment"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

Warning: This video contains abusive language, especially around physical and sexual assault.

1. Consider the roles of leanness and disinhibition in Twitter communication.
2. Discuss guidelines for civil use of social media.

2.3.3 Consider the Communicators and the Environment

Communication isn't all about you. It's necessary to think about crafting messages that will be well received by the other parties. The context in which you're communicating also matters.

Consider the Receiver's Preferences

Your best chance of being heard will come from choosing the channels preferred by the people you're trying to reach. You've probably said, "Why didn't you respond to my (text, e-message, voicemail, post)?" only to have the other person say, "Oh, I rarely check that." That's why communication scholars endorse **multimodality**: the ability and willingness to use multiple channels of communication (Zhou et al., 2021).

In a study of communication practices among first-year college students, a research team found that the respondents embraced multimodality (Morreale et al., 2015). The surveyed students said they typically text with friends, phone their families, and use email

when contacting instructors. They also said they would break up with a romantic partner in person rather than through digital media, and that they generally prefer face-to-face over mediated communication.

It's smart to analyze your audience and adapt to their channel preferences before communicating. In your analysis, consider not only demographic variables such as age, but also message content. As a rule of thumb, more serious and complex topics demand richer channels, such as face-to-face communication (Eden & Veksler, 2016). Texting and instant messaging are fine for updates and making plans, but most people say they prefer that personal and substantive conversations be handled in person, or at least over the phone (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Nowak, 2018). And remember that email is still a preferred channel in the workplace (Alton, 2021). Attempting to communicate professionally via texting or social media could be a breach of professional etiquette.

It's also smart to match the *amount* of information you send with the preferences of the people you want to reach. In general, people expect reciprocal amounts and depth of communication as they provide. For instance, social media users who actively provide a lot of Likes and reactions to posts expect similar responses to their own posts (Carr et al., 2018). Along the same lines, someone who frequently initiates communication with you might expect you to reciprocate this high level of connection. On the flip side, someone who only rarely or briefly messages you might not expect or want you to barrage them with frequent or long messages. (See Activity 4 at the end of the chapter for a skill builder about multimodality.)

Respect Others' Need for Undivided Attention

You might not realize that some people are insulted when you divide your attention between your in-person conversational partner and distant contacts. As one observer put it, "While a quick log-on may seem, to the user, a harmless break, others in the room receive it as a silent dismissal. It announces: 'I'm not interested'" (Bauerlein, 2009).

The mere presence of mobile devices can have a negative effect on closeness, connection, and conversation quality during face-to-face discussions of personal topics (Mirsa et al., 2016). You can probably recall times when you've wanted to say, "Put away that phone and talk to me!" Sherry Turkle (2015) refers to this use of technology as being physically present yet mentally absent.

Chapter 8 has plenty to say about the challenges of listening effectively when you are multitasking. And Chapter 13 describes the phenomenon known as "phubbing"—feeling snubbed by another's phone use. Even if you think you can understand others while dealing with communication media, it's important to realize they may perceive you as rude.

"It keeps me from looking at my phone every two seconds."

Be Mindful of Bystanders

Sometimes the use of communication technology annoys others in public spaces. For example, you might have encountered restaurant patrons whose phone voices intruded on your conversation, pedestrians who bumped into you because they were looking at their phones, or store customers talking on their phones while holding up a checkout line. If this sort of behavior doesn't bother you, it can be hard to feel sympathetic with others who are offended by it. Nonetheless, this is a situation in which the "platinum rule" applies: Consider treating others the way they would like to be treated.

Balance Mediated and Face Time

Mediated interpersonal communication resembles face-to face interaction in many ways, but it's very different in other respects. You can appreciate some of these differences by imagining how the legendary romance between Romeo and Juliet might have unfolded with modern technology (Wellman & Rainie, 2013). The couple could have declared their undying love using FaceTime or Zoom while their parents and cousins slept. To avoid being detected by their families, they could have exchanged impermanent messages via Snapchat. They even could have hidden their romance using "burner" mobile phones.

You don't have to be a fan of Shakespeare to recognize that these channels wouldn't have satisfied all of Romeo and Juliet's needs: They still would have craved being together in person. Even FaceTime is no substitute for genuine face time.

Earlier in this chapter, you read about the many negative consequences—mental, emotional, physical, relational—of spending too much time online. If you've had a loved one suggest that you're overly connected to your phone or computer, perhaps it's time for some honest self-appraisal. The Assessing Your Communication quiz at the end of the chapter can help you determine if your time spent online is in check.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 2.1 **Identify the benefits and drawbacks of mediated communication.**

Scholarship has identified both drawbacks and benefits of mediated communication. Some findings suggest that it alienates users, leads to superficial exchanges, and can damage both physical and emotional health. Other research reveals that mediated communication can better connect individuals, provide for meaningful exchanges, and enhance well-being. Careful analysis of research to date shows that mediated communication can be beneficial when used in moderation to actively engage with others in ongoing relationships.

Q: In what ways does your mediated communication enhance your relationships and wellbeing? In what ways does it lead to superficial contacts, alienation, and poor health?

Objective 2.2 **Distinguish between mediated interpersonal and masspersonal communication, and use each appropriately.**

Mediated interpersonal communication is characterized by personal interaction with a small number of identifiable

receivers, evoking a sense of mutual obligation with the expectation of privacy. Masspersonal communication also involves sharing personal information. However, masspersonal messages are aimed at larger audiences, have fewer assumptions of privacy, and less anticipation of responses. Both masspersonal and mediated interpersonal communication can be beneficial when used appropriately.

Q: How can you take advantage of both the interpersonal and the masspersonal forms of mediated communication?

Objective 2.3 **Apply the principles of competence to your mediated interpersonal and masspersonal communication.**

Competence in mediated communication involves choosing the optimal channels to achieve one's goals, considering the needs and preferences of other people involved, and balancing the use of technologies and face-to-face communication.

Q: How would a knowledgeable observer rate your competency in using mediated communication? How could you become more competent?

ACTIVITIES

1. **Self-Appraisal:** Section 2.1.3 (including the Dark Side box) identifies a number of negative effects of mediated communication on mental and emotional health. Review that section and assess whether you've experienced any of those effects. If so, what role do you think social media and your devices have played? Share your self-appraisal with someone you trust and get their feedback. If you identify any negative effects, what steps can you take to reduce the negative impact of mediated communication on your life?
2. **Reflection:** Do you tend to be more private or public in your mediated communication? Using the descriptions in Section 2.2, do you communicate more interpersonally or masspersonally when using mediated channels? After you've made your choice, consider if you want to increase your use of the other option—maybe by sending private messages to some friends or increasing your participation on family social media posts.
3. **Ethical Challenge:** As noted in Section 2.3.2 (and illustrated in Watch and Discuss 2.2), disinhibition and bad behavior increase when mediated messages are

posted anonymously. Do you believe anonymous posts are ethical? If so, under what conditions?

4. **Build Your Skill:** Section 2.3.3 describes the importance of multimodality—knowing how and when to use a variety of mediated channels for communicating. For each channel listed below, identify an *ideal* and *nonideal* occasion or recipient for that channel. For instance, "Texting is ideal to let someone know I'm waiting for them at the airport, but it's not ideal for breaking up with a romantic partner."
    a. Texting
    b. Email
    c. Voice call
    d. Social media post
    e. Videoconferencing

To further sharpen your skills and self-awareness, identify a few times when you used a nonideal channel for sending a particular message—and which channel you should have chosen instead.

Assessing Your Communication: Are You Spending Too Much Time Online? (Personal Practice)

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

asynchronous communication

disinhibition

hyperpersonal communication

Leanness

masspersonal communication

mediated communication

multimodality

richness

Social media

synchronous

weak ties

CHAPTER 2 Flashcards

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

3
Culture and Interpersonal Communication

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **3.1** Explain the relationship between intercultural and interpersonal dimensions of communication.
- **3.2** Describe five key values that help shape a culture's communication norms.
- **3.3** Recognize the range of co-cultures in today's society and how co-cultural factors can affect interpersonal communication.

3.4 **Explain the factors that shape a culture's verbal and nonverbal codes.**

3.5 **Identify the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required for intercultural communication competence.**

MORE THAN A HALF-CENTURY AGO, theorist Marshall McLuhan (1962) coined the metaphor of the world as a "global village," in which communication technology connects members of every nation. McLuhan suggested that, just like in a traditional village, our affairs are intertwined—for better or worse. This analysis has proven to be increasingly accurate.

Thanks to the growth in communication technology, commerce has changed in ways that would have been unimaginable just a generation ago. International phone service is affordable and efficient. The internet allows users around the world to share information with one another instantaneously, and members of global organizations can meet in virtual teams.

Beyond technology, demographic changes are transforming society. Countries such as the United States are in some ways microcosms of the global village, in that immigration has made society more multicultural and multiethnic than ever before (see Figure 3.1). This chapter explores how interpersonal

communication operates in a networked world where members of different cultures interact.

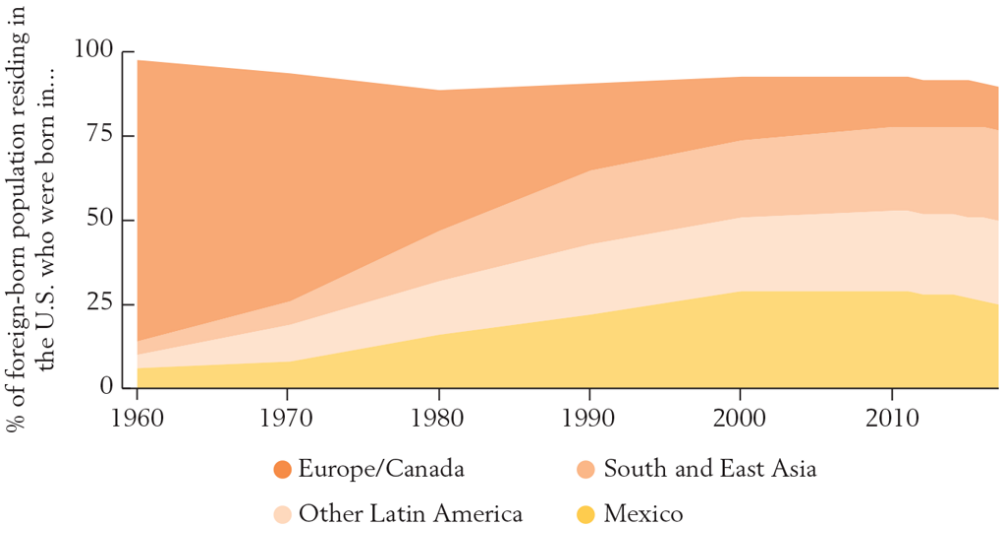


FIGURE 3.1 Origins of the U.S. immigrant population, 1960–2017
Data from Pew Research Center, 2019 View larger image

3.1 Culture and Communication

Before going any further, it's necessary to clarify two important concepts: *culture* and *intercultural communication*. This section also explains how intercultural and interpersonal dimensions interact.

3.1.1 Culture and Co-Culture

Defining culture isn't an easy task, as scholars acknowledge (Anheier, 2020). For our purposes, Larry Samovar and his colleagues (2007) offer a clear and comprehensive definition of **culture**: "the language, values, beliefs, traditions, and customs people share and learn."

This definition shows that culture is, to a great extent, a matter of *perception* and *definition*. When you identify yourself as a member of a culture, you must (a) recognize yourself and others as sharing certain characteristics and (b) see others who don't possess these characteristics as members of different categories. For example, eye color doesn't seem like a significant factor in distinguishing "us" from "them," whereas skin color has come to play a more important role in society, at least in some cases. But it's not hard to imagine a society where the opposite is true (look up Jane Elliot's famous blue

eyes/brown eyes experiment). **In-groups** are groups with whom you identify, and **out-groups** are those you view as different (Caughron et al., 2013). Cultural membership contributes to every person's **social identity**—the part of the self-concept based on membership in groups (Lu & Wan, 2018).

Social scientists use the term **co-culture** to describe the perception of membership in a group that is part of an encompassing culture (Fox & Warber, 2015; Orbe & Spellers, 2005). Co-cultures in the United States include categories based on a number of factors, including:

- age (e.g., octogenarian, teen)
- race/ethnicity (e.g., Black, Latinx)
- sexual orientation (e.g., lesbian, straight)
- nationality (e.g., expatriate or immigrant from a particular country)
- geographic region (e.g., Midwesterner, Southerner)
- physical disability (e.g., person who is blind, person who uses a wheelchair)
- religion (e.g., Muslim, Catholic)

Members of co-cultures develop unique patterns of communication and connection. Deaf culture is a good example: The shared experiences of deafness can create strong bonds, and signing offers a shared language. Of course, the connection experienced by members of this co-culture can create challenges when communicating with

those outside the group—especially if signing is their preferred (or only) language (Zemach, 2022). More on the deaf co-culture later in this chapter.

Regional co-cultures in the United States also have distinct communication patterns (Ebert et al., 2022). Extraversion, for example, is most pronounced in Southern states and much of the Midwest. Agreeableness is another Southern trait that's also present in and around the Dakotas and Minnesota. In contrast, people on the West Coast exhibit greater openness to new things and higher awareness of personal feelings and creative talents. Given these differences, a first-year college student from Georgia might regard a new roommate from California as creative but cool, while the West Coast native might view the Southerner as bubbly but traditional.

On a more serious level, members of non-dominant co-cultures face challenges when interacting with members of the dominant culture. According to **co-cultural theory** (Orbe & Roberts, 2012), communicators can use one of three primary strategies in this sort of situation. The first is *assimilation*—blending in with the dominant culture. For example, a woman in an organization made up of exclusively men might behave as "one of the guys" to get along and get the job done. Another strategy is *accommodation*—fitting into the dominant culture while maintaining your own identity. A Muslim woman who proudly wears a hajib on the job would fit this description. A third option would be *separation*—preserving a group identity that's distinct from the dominant culture. For example, neighbors belonging to an underrepresented population might choose to host a party only with members of their own group.

These strategies play out in higher education settings where co-cultures intersect. For example, focus groups revealed that Black students in predominantly white universities struggled to be proud of their cultural heritage while also trying to adapt to the "whiteness of their schools" (Simmons et al., 2013). On one hand, they wanted to share cultural insights with white students, but they were reluctant to call attention to themselves. The Focus on Research box in this section offers another co-cultural case study at a university.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Co-Cultural Strategies Among Latinx Students

A team of communication scholars wanted to know whether Latinx students interact differently with white students depending on the racial majority at school. Previous findings (Rudick et al., 2017) showed that Latinx students in predominantly white schools tend to use accommodation tactics when interacting with the majority culture—that is, they attempt to promote acceptance of their own culture while participating in predominantly white activities or organizations.

The researchers collected journal entries and ran focus groups with Latinx students at a Southwestern U.S. university where 45 percent of the students were Latinx and 39 percent were white. Surprisingly, the Latinx students reported that they primarily used assimilation strategies in their interactions with whites—they attempted to "fit in" with white culture, even though Latinxs were the statistical majority.

The Latinx students at that school said they engaged in a high level of self-monitoring and self-censorship. Here are some of their descriptions:

- "I decided to blow it off and keep my head high just so the [white] person will not know how much his comment really affected me."
- "Remember it is how you dress, it is how you walk, and how you talk that makes you suspect. If you do not fit in, you stand out, you might scare them [whites]."
- "I can pass for white and I don't speak with an accent even though I speak fluent Spanish … and since I'm American, I dress in typical American fashion."

The researchers were concerned that Latinx students "feel the need to engage in co-cultural communication due to their perception of being a part of a marginalized group." They recommend celebrating Latinx heritage in Latinx-only settings as a way to increase solidarity and pride. In addition, instructors can help by dispelling the assumption that white culture is a default or preferred way of engaging.

Sanford, A. A., Rudick, C. K., Nainby, K., Golsan, K. B., Rodriguez, S. R., & Claus, C. J. (2019). "I was gonna go off, but my best friend is White.": Hispanic students' co-cultural reasoning in a Hispanic serving institution. *Communication Quarterly, 67*, 158–177.

Some co-cultural groups face exclusion and discrimination related to their identity. For instance, underrepresented groups are disadvantaged in employment interviews, where the rules are

established by the dominant culture (Sonderegger, 2017). Studies of Jamaican children (Ferguson & Cramer, 2007) and Latinx children (Golash-Boza & Darity, 2008) indicate that skin color influences self-identification and self-esteem. Black adolescents in predominantly white schools say they often draw on their sense of belonging to their co-culture to help cope with discrimination (Leah et al., 2019).

As you read this chapter, you'll notice that many of the communication challenges that arise between members of different cultures also emerge when people from different co-cultures interact. (See Activity 1 at the end of this chapter for a reflection about your co-cultural memberships.)

In the TV series *We Are Lady Parts*, an aspiring punk band's love of music unites diverse Muslim friends at the intersection of different racial, ethnic, educational, social, and even religious backgrounds. ***Which co-cultures are most salient to your identity? How do these groups influence your friendships?*** View larger image

3.1.2 Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication occurs when members of two or more cultures or co-cultures exchange messages in a manner that is influenced by their different cultural perceptions and symbol systems, both verbal and nonverbal (Samovar et al., 2007).

Because all of us belong to many groups (e.g., ethnic, economic, interest-based, age-related), you might be asking yourself whether there is any communication that *isn't* intercultural, or at least co-cultural. The answer to this question is "yes" for two reasons. First, even in an increasingly diverse world, people share a basic common background in plenty of relationships. Consider co-cultural groups such as Irish marchers in a St. Patrick's Day parade, suburban men who play poker on Fridays, and members of college Greek organizations. Within each of these groups, people are likely to share fundamentally similar histories and, therefore, have similar norms, customs, and values. Second, even when people with different cultural backgrounds communicate, those differences may not be important. David may be a Jewish American whose ancestors came from Eastern Europe, whereas Lisa is a third-generation Japanese American whose parents are practicing Christians. Yet they could create a life together that largely transcends their differences.

Rather than classifying some exchanges as intercultural and others as free from cultural influences, it's more accurate to talk about *degrees* of cultural significance (King et al., 2013). Encounters can fit along a spectrum of "interculturalness." At the "most intercultural" end are situations in which communicators have highly different

backgrounds or beliefs. A traveler visiting a new country with little knowledge of the local society is an obvious example. At the other end of the spectrum fall exchanges in which cultural differences are not very significant. For example, regional differences may not greatly affect an Arizonan attending college in the Midwest. In between these extremes lies a whole range of encounters in which culture plays varying roles.

Note that intercultural communication (at least as that term is used here) doesn't always occur when people from different cultures interact. To conclude that culture has an effect, the cultural backgrounds, perceptions, and symbol systems of the participants must have a significant impact on the exchange. Social scientists use the term **salience** to describe the weight you attach to a particular person or phenomenon. Consider a few examples where culture has little or no salience:

- A group of preschool children is playing together in a park. These 3-year-olds don't know or recognize that their parents may come from different countries. At this point intercultural communication isn't taking place. Only when cultural factors become salient (e.g., because of different diets or parental styles) do the children begin to think of one another as different.
- Members of a school basketball team—some Asian, some Black, some Latinx, and some white—are intent on winning the league championship. During a game, cultural distinctions aren't salient. There's plenty of communication, but it isn't fundamentally intercultural. Off court, however,

they might notice some fundamental differences in the way members of each group communicate.

- A couple were raised in homes with different religious traditions. Most of the time these differences have little effect on their relationship. Every so often, however—perhaps during religious holidays or when meeting members of each other's family—their backgrounds are more salient. At those times the partners might feel quite different from each other, thinking of themselves as members of separate cultures.

3.1.3 Interpersonal and Intercultural Dimensions of Communication

What is the relationship between intercultural and interpersonal communication? William Gudykunst (2005) proposes a model of interpersonal and intercultural factors based on a two-by-two matrix (Figure 3.2). This model shows that some interpersonal transactions (e.g., a conversation between two siblings who have been raised in the same household) have virtually no intercultural elements. Other encounters (e.g., a traveler from Senegal trying to get directions from a Ukrainian taxi driver in New York City) are almost exclusively intercultural, without the personal dimensions discussed throughout this book.

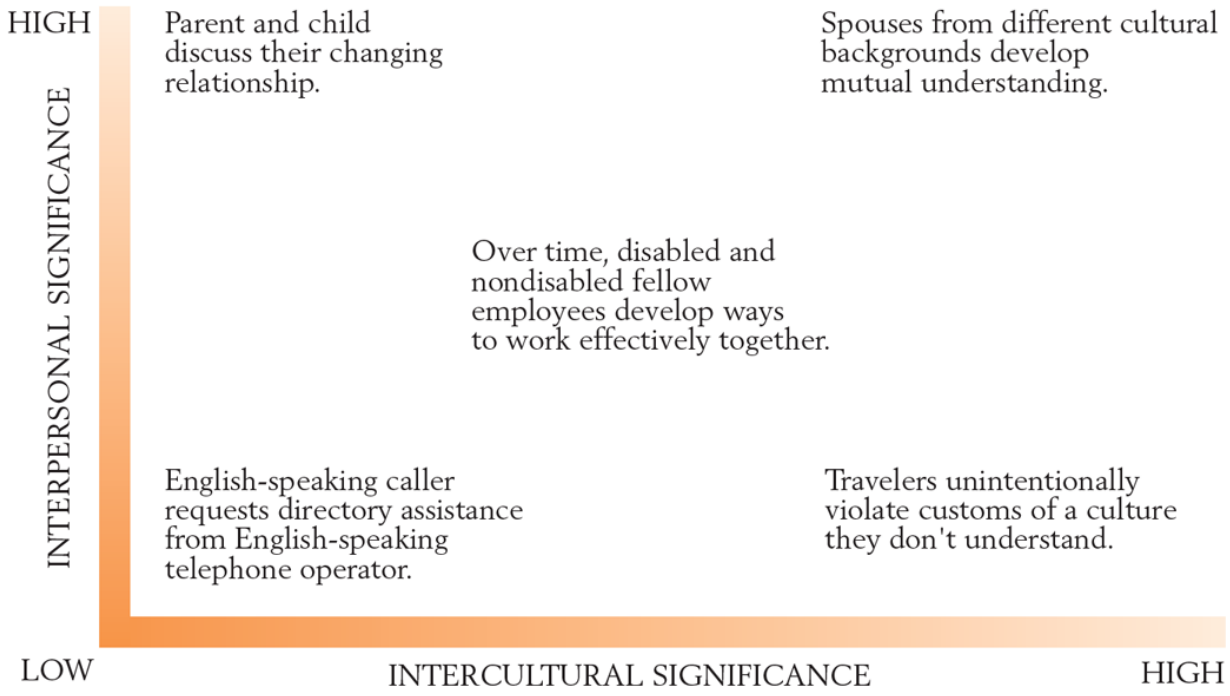

HIGH
INTERPERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE
Parent and child discuss their changing relationship.
Spouses from different cultural backgrounds develop mutual understanding.
Over time, disabled and nondisabled fellow employees develop ways to work effectively together.
English-speaking caller requests directory assistance from English-speaking telephone operator.
Travelers unintentionally violate customs of a culture they don't understand.
LOW
INTERCULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE
HIGH

FIGURE 3.2 Sample Interactions Between Interpersonal and Intercultural Dimensions of Communication View larger image

Still other exchanges—the most interesting ones for our purposes—contain elements of both intercultural and interpersonal communication. This range of encounters is broad in the global village: businesspeople from different backgrounds try to wrap up a deal; health care educators seek effective ways to serve patients from around the world; neighbors from different racial or ethnic backgrounds look for ways to make their streets safer and cleaner; suburban teachers seek common ground with downtown students—the list seems almost endless.

3.1.4 Intercultural Differences as Generalizations

Cultural variations can be significant, but it's important to remember that practices across cultures aren't *totally* different. People from varied backgrounds often share enough common ground to make relationships work.

Moreover, differences are sometimes greater *within* cultures than *between* them (Hanel et al., 2018). Consider the matter of formality as an example. By most measures, U.S. culture is far more casual than many others. But as Figure 3.3 illustrates, there may be common ground between a formal American and a casual member of a formal culture. Furthermore, within every culture, members display a wide range of communication styles. For instance, although most Asian cultures tend to be collectivistic, some members of those cultures might identify as individualists. For these reasons, it's important to remember that the generalizations you'll read about in the following section don't apply to every member of a group.

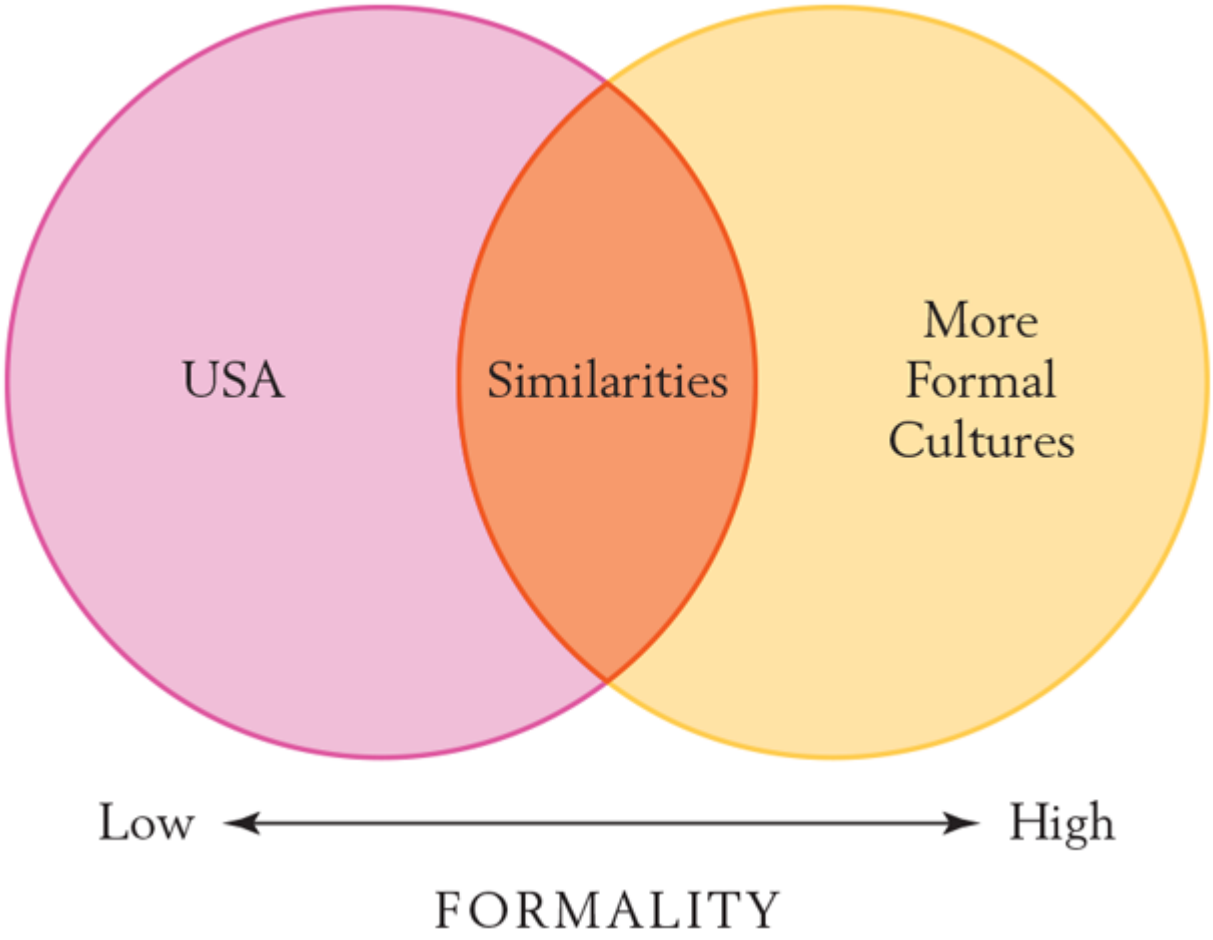


FIGURE 3.3 Intercultural Differences and Similarities in Formality View larger image

3.2 Cultural Values and Norms

Some cultural influences on communication are obvious. However, some far less visible values and norms can shape how members of cultures think and act (Chung & Rimal, 2016). This section examines five of these subtle yet important factors. Unless communicators are aware of these differences, they may see people from other cultures as unusual—or even offensive. For this reason, it's important to understand that what may seem like odd behavior may result from a different set of beliefs and unwritten rules.

As you think about the cultural values and norms described here, you may realize that they are not necessarily differences by nationality. In today's increasingly multicultural society, people from different cultural backgrounds are likely to encounter one another at home, in the country they share.

3.2.1 High Versus Low Context

Anthropologist Edward Hall (1959) identified two distinct ways that members of various cultures deliver messages. A **high-context culture** relies heavily on subtle, often nonverbal cues to maintain social harmony. High-context communicators pay close attention to nonverbal behaviors, the history of relationships, and social rules

that govern interactions. By contrast, a **low-context culture** uses language primarily to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas as directly as possible. To low-context communicators, the meaning of a statement lies in the words spoken. Table 3.1 summarizes some key differences in how people from high- and low-context cultures communicate.

TABLE 3.1 High- Versus Low-Context Communication Cultures

	High Context	Low Context
Representative national cultures	Most Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and Southern European countries	The United States, Canada, and most Northern European countries
How most important information is carried	Contextual cues such as time, place, relationship, and situation	Explicit verbal messages, with less focus on the situational context
What communicators value	Relational harmony, maintained by indirect expression of options	Self-expression, striving to persuade others to accept one's viewpoint
What communicators admire	Ambiguity and the use of silence	Clear, direct speech

Mainstream cultures in the United States, Canada, and Northern Europe fall toward the low-context end of the scale. In these cultures, communicators generally value straight talk and can grow impatient with indirect behaviors such as hinting (Tili & Barker, 2015). By contrast, most Asian and Middle Eastern mainstream cultures fit the

high-context pattern and can be offended by the bluntness of low-context communication styles (Yum, 2012).

There are other examples of communication differences between high- and low-context cultures. East Asians (high-context) use more emoticons and emojis than Americans (low-context), especially in threatening situations (Togans et al., 2021). As you'll learn in Section 7.2.4, emojis and emoticons supply important nonverbal information. In a similar vein, people in China, relative to people in the United States, prefer face-to-face exchanges to email (Yang, X., et al., 2021). Together, these studies show the value high-context cultures place on nonverbal and contextual cues.

In the Korean streaming sensation *Squid Game*, characters such as Kang Sae-byeok (Hoyeon Jung) are so motivated by duty to family that they will risk death for the sake of that in-group. ***Which are your most important in-groups? How do you communicate your loyalty to them?*** View larger image

3.2.2 Individualism Versus Collectivism

Some cultures value the individual, whereas others emphasize the group. Members of an **individualistic culture** view their primary responsibility as helping themselves, whereas communicators in **collectivistic cultures** feel loyalties and obligations to in-groups: extended family, the community, or even organizations (Hofstede, 2011). Individualistic cultures also are characterized by self-reliance and competition, whereas members of a collectivistic culture are more attentive to and concerned with the opinions of others. Scholars regard individualism–collectivism as the most fundamental dimension of cultural differences (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019) and also the most likely cause of intercultural misunderstandings (Yang, 2015). Table 3.2 summarizes some differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

TABLE 3.2 The Self in Individualistic Versus Collectivistic Cultures

	Individualistic	Collectivistic
Representative national cultures	The United States, Canada, the United Kingdom	Ecuador, Indonesia, Pakistan, Korea
View of self in relation to group	Separate and unique individual; should be independent, self-sufficient	Part of extended family or in-group; "we" or group orientation
Care philosophy	Care for self and immediate family before others	Care for extended family before self

	Individualistic	Collectivistic
Group membership	Many flexible group memberships; friendships based on shared interests and activities	Emphasis on belonging to a very few permanent in-groups, which have a strong influence
What is rewarded	Individual achievement and initiative; individual decision making	Contribution to group goals and well-being; cooperation with in-group members; group decision making
Credit and blame assignment	Individually assigned	Shared by the group
What communicators value	Autonomy, change, youth, individual security, equality	Duty, order, tradition, age, group security, status, and hierarchy

Members of individualistic cultures tend to view themselves in terms of what they do, whereas people in collectivistic cultures are more likely to define themselves in terms of group membership. For instance, members of several cultures were asked to answer the question "Who am I?" 20 times (DeAngelis, 1992). North Americans were likely to respond by giving details about themselves as individuals ("I am athletic"; "I am short"). By contrast, members of more collectivistic societies—Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, and some South American cultures, for example—more often answered in terms of their relationships with others ("I am a father"; "I am an employee of XYZ Corporation").

Individualistic and collectivistic cultures also differ in the level of comfort or anxiety communicators feel. In societies where the need to conform is greater, communication apprehension is higher. For example, as a group, residents of China, Korea, and Japan exhibit a significantly higher degree of anxiety about speaking out in public than do members of individualistic cultures such as the United States and Australia (Berry, 2007). It's important to realize that different levels of communication apprehension don't mean that shyness is problematic in some cultures. In fact, just the opposite is true: When the goal is to avoid being "the nail that sticks out," feeling nervous is natural when you call attention to yourself. In these societies, not only is restraint highly valued, but social anxiety can even foster social support (Krieg, 2020).

One study looked at how cultural values influence the way parents communicate with their children (Wakefield, 2013). The author found a sharp contrast between American English (AE) and Hong Kong Cantonese (HKC) cultures in parent–child interactions. AE parents, who value individualism, often pose questions to their children and offer them options. ("Would you like to say hello to your uncle?"). Collectivistic HKC parents typically give directives and expect compliance. ("Say hello to your uncle."). These communication patterns are rooted in cultural values. Rather than viewing these differences negatively (AE parents are "indulgent"; HKC parents are "demanding"), it's best to see them as reflections of their cultural value systems.

In another example of how cultural values affect communication, an Indian author expressed surprise at how often Americans say "thank

you" to others—especially to family members (Singh, 2015). From his perspective, thanking loved ones for fulfilling their collectivistic obligations is insulting. "I've never thanked my parents for anything," he notes. "By thanking them, you're violating your intimacy with them and creating formality and distance that shouldn't exist." After living in the U.S. for more than a decade, he now thanks people often in the States, but he avoids the practice in India after offending an uncle by thanking him for his hospitality.

3.2.3 Power Distance

In democratic societies, the principle of equality among humans is a fundamental ideal. However, not all cultures share this view. Some operate on the assumption that certain groups of people (an aristocracy or an economic class, for example) and some institutions (such as a church or the government) should have the right to control the lives of individuals. Geert Hofstede (1984, 2011) coined the term **power distance** to describe the degree to which members of a society accept an unequal distribution of power.

Cultures with low power distance believe in minimizing distinctions between various social classes. People of all income and education levels still exist, but in low-power-difference cultures there is a pervasive belief that one person is as valuable as another. Low-power-distance cultures also support the notion that challenging authority is acceptable—even desirable. Members aren't necessarily punished for raising questions about the status quo. According to Hofstede's research, U.S. and Canadian societies have relatively low

power distance, although not the lowest in the world. Austria, Denmark, Israel, and New Zealand proved to be the most egalitarian countries. At the other end of the spectrum are countries with a high degree of power distance: Philippines, Mexico, Venezuela, India, and Singapore.

The degree of power distance in a culture is reflected in key relationships (Santilli & Miller, 2011). Parenting styles and expectations of children vary widely from high-to low-power-distance cultures. The greater the power distance, the less likely children are to question their parents or other authority figures. Power automatically comes with age in many countries. For example, the Korean language has separate terms for *older brother*, *oldest brother*, *younger sister*, *youngest sister*, and so on.

On-the-job communication is different in low- and high-power-distance societies (Zerfass et al., 2016). In countries with higher degrees of power distance, employees have much less input into the way they perform their work. In fact, workers from these cultures are likely to feel apprehensive when given freedom to make their own decisions (Madlock, 2012) or when a more egalitarian boss asks for their opinion. The reverse is true when management from a culture with an egalitarian tradition tries to do business in a country whose workers are used to high power distance. They can be surprised to find that employees do not expect much say in decisions and do not feel unappreciated when they aren't consulted.

Researchers wanted to see the effects of power distance on workplace negotiations (Liu et al., 2019). They recruited participants from differing cultures to role-play managers and employees making decisions about salary, benefits, and resources. The least effective combination was high-power-distance bosses paired with low-power-distance subordinates. It's easy to imagine those managers handing out decrees while the employees wondered, "Can we please just discuss this?" These bosses experienced more anger and had poorer outcomes in the role-plays than did bosses in other power-distance combinations. This doesn't mean that high power distance leads to poor management. Rather, it demonstrates the importance of understanding the cultural values at work when engaging in

negotiations— and perhaps making expectations explicit at the outset.

3.2.4 Uncertainty Avoidance

The desire to resolve uncertainty seems to be a universal trait (Berger, 1988). That said, cultures have different ways of coping with an unpredictable future. Hofstede (2011) uses the term **uncertainty avoidance** to reflect the levels of discomfort or threat people feel in response to ambiguous situations and how much they try to avoid them. He developed an uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) to measure these levels. His work has shown that residents of some countries (including Singapore, Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden, Hong Kong, and the United States) are less threatened by change and ambiguity than those of others (such as Belgium, Greece, Japan, and Portugal).

Communication patterns can reflect a culture's degree of uncertainty avoidance. In cultures where this tendency is high, people tend to seek stability and avoid risk both at home and abroad (Yang, S., et al., 2021). Especially concerned with security, they have a strong need for clearly defined rules and regulations. Deviant individuals and ideas are generally considered dangerous, and intolerance and ethnocentrism are high (Cargile & Bolkan, 2013). By contrast, members of cultures less threatened by the new and unexpected are more likely to accept—or even welcome—unusual people and unfamiliar situations.

When an American who is relatively comfortable with change and novelty spends time with someone from a high-UAI culture, such as Japan, each communicator may find the other behaving in disconcerting ways. The American may view the Japanese person as rigid and overly controlled, whereas the Japanese person may regard the American as undisciplined and overly tolerant. If each communicator understands how their cultural conditioning affects their style, however, they are more likely to understand, and maybe even learn from, the styles of others.

3.2.5 Achievement Versus Nurturing

The term **achievement culture** describes societies that place a high value on material success and a focus on the task at hand. By contrast, a **nurturing culture** regards the support of relationships as an especially important goal.

People from achievement versus nurturing cultures voice their opinions in significantly different ways (Hofstede, 2016; van den Bos et al., 2010). In achievement cultures (e.g., the United States)—which emphasize outperforming others—those who see themselves as highly capable feel more empowered to voice their opinions and are satisfied when they can do so. By contrast, in nurturing cultures (e.g., the Netherlands)—which emphasize helping—those who see themselves as *less* capable feel valued as important group members and feel more satisfied when they have the opportunity to voice their opinions. (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for a self-appraisal of your cultural values and norms.)

3.3 Co-Cultures and Communication

Much of how you view yourself and how you relate to others grows from your cultural and co-cultural identity—the groups with which you identify. Where do you come from? What's your ethnicity? Your sexual orientation? Your age? Your socioeconomic status? These have become increasingly important factors in interpersonal communication in contemporary society.

The following pages consider some—although by no means all—of the factors that help shape your cultural identity and hence the ways you perceive and communicate with others.

3.3.1 Race and Ethnicity

Race is a social construction that categorizes people by physical traits, cultural traits, and ancestry. As contemporary scientists explain, race has no biological basis (Kolbert, 2018). One analyst puts it this way:

> There is less to race than meets the eye. … The genes influencing skin color have nothing to do with the genes influencing hair form, eye shape, blood type, musical talent, athletic ability or forms of intelligence. Knowing someone's skin color doesn't necessarily tell you anything else about him or her. ("Ten Things," 2003)

Racial categories vary by culture, and genetic variation within races can be greater than between them (Witherspoon et al., 2007). For instance, in any given racial group, some people are short, but others are tall. Some have sunny dispositions, while others are more stern. Some are terrific athletes, while others are less so. The same applies to people from every racial background. As you will read in Chapter 5, stereotyping is harmful—and yet racial stereotyping occurs frequently.

Ethnicity refers to the degree to which a person identifies with a particular group, usually on the basis of nationality, culture, or some other unifying perspective (Samovar et al., 2013). For example, Irish Protestants and Catholics identify as ethnically distinct from one another. The same holds true for many Sunni and Shia Muslims as well as French- and English-speaking Canadians.

It is simplistic to think of people as members of only a single category. Consider former U.S. president Barack Obama, whose father was Black and mother white. Obama experienced a variety of cultures while living in Indonesia, Hawaii, California, New York, Chicago, and Washington, DC. Recognizing that culture is multidimensional, scholars have developed the concept of **intersectionality** to describe the interplay of social categories that shape identity (Razzante et al., 2021). These multiple standpoints—which include gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and disability status—may be a source of either oppression or privilege.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Why Cultural Appropriation Is Inappropriate

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery—in some cases. In others, it's an insult. Cultural appropriation is "the misrepresentation, misuse, and theft of the stories, styles, and material heritage of people who have been historically dominated and remain socially marginalized" (Matthes, 2016). It can take many forms, many of which are not obvious at first glance.

For instance, imagine you are European American, and your costume for a dorm party consists of a sombrero and fake handlebar moustache. To your surprise, your Mexican American friends ignore you all night. Later they explain that your get-up disrespected their heritage. Beyond blatant stereotyping, mimicry may still be viewed negatively as a form of identity theft. When singer Rihanna, for example, posted a photo on social media of her topless while wearing a pendant of the Hindu god Ganesha, it prompted backlash summed up in this in-group response: "Our culture is not your costume" (Holland, 2021).

Activities as diverse as sweat lodge retreats, the Western practice of yoga, and white rapping and twerking have all sparked debates about cultural ownership (Deshpande, 2017; Nittle, 2019). Distinguishing appreciation from appropriation can be tricky. But before you don a Native American headdress for Burning Man or apply a bindi just for Coachella, ask yourself whether this "borrowing" is appropriate and respectful. Are you

just following a trend, or is your interest in this co-culture genuine and informed? And more importantly, what does the cultural artifact or custom mean to members of this group? There's a simple way to find out: Ask. If you know members of the co-culture you're imitating, inquire how they feel about it. And if you *don't* know members of that co-culture, that might be all the warning you need.

Multigroup membership can be complicated due to stressors within interracial families and discrimination in society at large (Roy et al., 2022). But embracing this complexity provides benefits (Latson, 2019). Those who identify as multiracial report greater self-esteem, well-being, and social engagement than multiracial people who identify with only one group. Greater experience negotiating multiple identities might help explain why people of mixed race tend to be more open-minded, adaptable, and creative (Gaither, 2015). Multigroup members can also be more comfortable establishing relationships with a diverse array of people, which increases their options for friendships, romantic partners, and professional colleagues (Bonam & Shih, 2009). For example, musical artist Alicia Keys says she could easily talk to friends of all backgrounds in the multiethnic Harlem neighborhood where she grew up: "My mixed-race background made me a broad person able to relate to different cultures" (Graham, 2017).

3.3.2 Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

Anderson Cooper came out to friends and family as a high school student, but when he became a journalist, he initially decided not to disclose his sexual orientation (Sullivan, 2012). Reporters typically keep their personal lives private, and the CNN anchor had worked abroad in countries that criminalize same-sex relations. However, as the internet and social media eroded any expectation of privacy, Cooper decided to disclose that he is gay. Breaking his silence increased visibility of this co-culture, which Cooper hoped would help fight prejudice: "I reached a point where, by not saying something, I realized I was saying something" (Gomez, 2019).

A supportive communication climate can ease the decision of whether and how to disclose gender identity or sexual orientation (Dixon, 2013). Social networking platforms provide a multitude of ways for communicators to express identities related to sexual orientation (Fox & Warber, 2015). These expressions can be affirming when the information is well received. But LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) communicators who aren't out to family and friends might fear the consequences of going public, even when public opinion is shifting in a more supportive direction. To manage their online identities for different audiences, young LGBTQ people sometimes use strategies such as creating multiple social media accounts (McConnell et al., 2018).

On one hand, being open about identity has advantages—including a sense of being authentic with others and belonging to a supportive community (Ahmad et al., 2018). On the other, the disclosure can sometimes be risky, particularly for members of multiple co-cultures (Mitchum, 2013). People may ridicule LGBTQ people, discriminate against them, or even attack them. On average, twenty-three percent of hate crimes in the United States targets others on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2021). Violence committed against transgender people in particular has risen dramatically in recent years (Rozsa, 2022). For more about bullying and its antidotes, see Chapter 13.

Websites like ItGetsBetter.org deliver the message to LGBTQ youth that any harassment they may be experiencing isn't their fault and that many people care about them. Since the It Gets Better Project launched in 2010, more than 70,000 people have shared their stories of hope and encouragement on social media. Cofounder Dan Savage says it shows what can happen when communication technology and good intentions combine (Barth, 2013).

The LGBTQ acronym doesn't describe every sexual orientation and gender identity. Some people have lobbied to add A for *asexual*; others recommend a + sign representing the host of descriptors not covered in the original acronym. These include non-binary and genderfluid identities. Actor Asia Kate Dillon has such a gender identity and uses they/their/them pronouns (see photo/caption in this section). For Dillon and many others, gender identity is far more important than the sex they were assigned at birth. This is increasingly true for members of younger generations, who are more

likely to see themselves as gender diverse (Monro, 2019). The larger point here is that the tent of the LGBTQ co-culture is expanding, and many are finding a sense of community within it (Boyer & Galupo, 2018).

Actor Asia Kate Dillon identifies as nonbinary and genderfluid. When Dillon first discovered the term *nonbinary*, they said, "That's the word. There's actually a word for it"—and then cried (Masters, 2017). ***What terms best describe your gender identity? Do you feel a sense of community with those who use similar descriptors?*** View larger image

3.3.3 Age and Generation

Imagine how odd it would seem to hear an 8-year-old or a 68-year-old talking, dressing, or otherwise acting like a twenty-something. Getting older is typically viewed as a purely biological process. But age-related communication reflects culture at least as much as it reflects biology. In many ways, you learn how to perform various ages—how to talk, how to dress, and what not to say and do—in the same way you learn how to play other roles in your life.

The cultural assumptions that shape relationships between older and younger people can change with time. At some points in history, older adults have been regarded as wise, accomplished, and even possessing magical powers (Fitch, 1985). At others, they have been treated as "dead weight" and uncomfortable reminders of mortality and decline (Gergen & Gergen, 2010).

Today, for the most part, cultures dominated by western European values honor youth, while attitudes and talk about older adults are largely ageist. This group, especially older women, is underrepresented in media images (Edström, 2018). And the representations that do emerge tend to be unflattering: a large study across various media revealed six times more negative descriptions of older adults than positive ones (Ng, 2021). Yet when surveyed, these people tell a different story. They are much happier than the bored, miserable, and frail depictions of them. In fact, it's middle age when life satisfaction is lower likely due to greater pressures caring for family and succeeding at work (Wittenberg-Cox, 2022).

Unfavorable attitudes about aging can show up in interpersonal relationships. Even though wrinkles and gray or thinning hair don't necessarily signify diminished capacity, they may be interpreted that way—with powerful consequences. People who believe older adults have trouble communicating are less likely to interact with them. When they do, they tend to use speech mannerisms such as simplified or babyish grammar and vocabulary, increased volume and reduced rate, and repetition—all examples of overaccommodation (Giles & Gasiorek, 2011; Harwood, 2007).

Communication challenges can arise when members of different generations work together. Although millennials and Generation Z, for example, are highly achievement-oriented, they respond more productively to coaching than managing, a style favored by older generations (Deluliis & Saylor, 2021). A coach focuses on nurturing relationships rather than just completing tasks or mastering skills. With their greater work experience and seniority, Generation X and boomers, however, may not be open to the collaborative approach younger employees expect. Preferences for communication channels may also differ. When addressing conflict or complex problems, older generations prefer face-to-face communication, while Gen Z typically relies on texting (Schroth, 2019). Neither perspective is inherently wrong. But when members of these co-cultures have different expectations, miscommunication can occur.

3.3.4 (Dis)abilities

One in four U.S. adults lives with a disability that affects major life activities (Centers for Disease Control, 2018). Some disabilities, such as chronic mental health issues or certain cognitive challenges, aren't easily observable. Others are more visible, such as mobility or vision issues.

"It's not like I like it, but I feel like it's … part of me," says Billie Eilish of her Tourette syndrome. Still, she doesn't appreciate when those who are unaware of her condition laugh at her tics. ***Have you ever responded inappropriately to another person's disability? If so, what would be a better way to respond?*** View larger image

Communication scholars investigated how people with disabilities manage the challenges of fitting in at their places of work (Cohen & Avanzino, 2010). Participants in the study described several strategies for integrating into the culture of their organizations, from de-emphasizing differences to dispelling misperceptions. None of the study participants wanted to be defined by their disabilities.

John Altmann (2016) underscores this point by explaining the frustration of being identified only by his disability. The experience he describes took place when a motivational speaker addressed a group of high school students:

> The speaker was charismatic, exhibited a warm, jovial disposition and a wonderful sense of humor. I was smiling and laughing with the rest of the group. But at the end of the assembly, my friend and I were singled out by the speaker, who said something that people with disabilities hear often—that because I got around on crutches and she with a scooter, we were "inspiring."
>
> In that moment my personal characteristics, the people I love, the interests I pursue and the beliefs I hold became moot, and the fact that I have cerebral palsy and use crutches to walk became the entirety of who John Altmann is and what he is about.
>
> The friend who I sat with at the assembly got it. … We wanted to be more than our disabilities, to overcome them and forge an identity apart from them.

Many disabled people find that belonging to a community of similar people can be rewarding. Deaf culture is a striking example: There are Deaf schools, Deaf competitions (e.g., Miss Deaf America), Deaf performing arts (including Deaf comedians), and other organizations that bring people who are deaf together. Capital "D" Deaf signifies a celebration of their shared identity, culture, and language (Garraud, 2021). For members of this community, being "different from" doesn't mean "less than." One former airline pilot who lost his

hearing described his trip to China, where he interacted with Deaf colleagues:

> Though we used different signed languages, these Chinese Deaf people and I could make ourselves understood; and though we came from different countries, our mutual Deaf culture held us together. … *You* couldn't do that in China. … Who's disabled then? (Solomon, 2012)

Similarly, one Deaf writer describes her condition not as a disability but rather a welcome "ability to turn off sound." She encourages others to embrace silence, or at least some time without constant content consumption: "You might even slip into boredom long enough to hear what your mind is saying" (Novic, 2022).

3.3.5 Socioeconomic Status

People in the United States typically identify as belonging to—and are readily identified by others as belonging to—the lower, working, middle, or upper class (Kraus et al., 2017). Socioeconomic background can have a significant impact on how people communicate. For instance, American working-class students who have been taught to respect authority and value interdependence may be less comfortable with individualistic self-expression (Stephens et al., 2014).

In the workplace, skills such as assertiveness and persuasiveness are career enhancers. People who come from working-class families may have to adopt new verbal and nonverbal behaviors to gain acceptance (Kaufman, 2003). Many also must cope with emotional ambivalences—a sense of both finding and losing their identity—related to their career success (Lubrano, 2004).

At home, first-generation college (FGC) students may be cautious when talking about college life for fear of threatening and alienating their families. Some even report feeling like "traitors" (Simmons et al., 2013). Others feel a need to model their new educational status to younger family members so "they can see that it can be done."

FGC students may feel the intercultural strain of "trying to live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds" of home and school (Lippincott & German, 2007; Orbe & Groscurth, 2004). Supportive communication from family (Wang & Nuru, 2017) and from college

counselors and faculty (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018) helps ease the stress of the transition from high school. FGC students often cope with an unfamiliar school environment by making an effort to assimilate—going out of their way to fit in on campus. In addition, some FGC students say they overcompensate by studying harder and getting more involved on campus than their non-FGC classmates, just to prove they belong in the college culture (Smith, 2018). Their hard work is paying off—literally. College graduates whose parents never attended college are, on average, working and earning as much as their peers whose parents are better educated (Barshay, 2018).

3.4 Codes and Culture

At this point, you probably have a healthy appreciation for the challenges that arise when people try to communicate interpersonally and interculturally. These challenges become even greater when the communicators use different verbal and nonverbal communication systems.

3.4.1 Verbal Codes

Although the world's many languages have some remarkable similarities (Lewis et al., 2013), they also differ in important respects that affect communication within and between language groups. The following subsections outline some of those factors.

Language and Identity

If you live in a culture where everyone speaks the same language, you may not notice how it affects your view of yourself and others. But what happens when some members of a society speak a lesser-used language? Speakers of a nondominant language can feel pressured to assimilate, or they can decide not to speak the dominant language (Gann, 2004). The impact of language on the self-concept is

powerful (Möller et al., 2020). It's not surprising that people feel most confident and comfortable when communicating in their language of greatest proficiency with people from their own culture (Allen et al., 2014).

Even the names a culture uses to identify its members reflect its values and shape the way its members relate to one another. When asked to identify themselves, individualistic Americans, Canadians, Australians, and Europeans are most likely to respond by giving their first name, surname, street, town, and country—in that order. Many Asians respond the other way around (Smith, 2011). If you ask Hindus for their identity, many will give you their caste and village and then their name. The Sanskrit formula for identifying oneself begins with lineage, goes on to state family and house, and ends with one's personal name (Bharti, 1985). Japanese has as many as 100 different ways to say *I*, depending on whether you want to be polite, casual, businesslike, or arrogant; to emphasize your family role, your social situation, age, or gender ("100 Ways to Say 'I' in Japanese," 2013).

@WORK

Organizations Are Cultures

Organizations have cultures that can be just as distinctive as those of larger societies. *Organizational culture* reflects a relatively stable, shared set of values and behavioral rules within a company (Alvesson, 2011). Not all the rules and values of an organization are written down. And some that are written

down aren't actually followed. Perhaps the workday officially ends at 5:00 p.m., but you quickly notice that most people stay until at least 6:30. That says something about the culture.

Because you're likely to spend as much time at work as you do in personal relationships, selecting the right organization is as important as choosing a best friend. Research shows that you are likely to enjoy your job and do it well if you believe that the organization's values reflect your own and are consistently and fairly applied (Akpa et al., 2021). For example, some companies reward team members for offering great customer service without exception. Yet a boss who talks about customer service while violating those principles may cultivate a culture of cynicism and dissatisfaction.

Ask yourself these questions when considering whether a specific organization's culture is a good fit for you. (Notice the importance of communication in each case.)

- Is there a spirit of cooperation or competition among team members?
- What criteria are used to evaluate employee performance?
- How often do people leave their jobs to work somewhere else?
- Do leaders make a point of listening to, respecting, and collaborating with employees?
- Do people use their time productively, or are they bogged down with inefficient procedures or office

politics?

Research suggests that communication—even small talk (Mak & Chui, 2013)—is the vehicle through which people both create and embody culture. At both personal and organizational levels, effective, consistent, value-based communication is essential to success.

Verbal Communication Styles

Using language is more than just a matter of choosing a particular group of words to convey an idea. Each language has its own unique style that distinguishes it from others. The degrees of directness, elaboration, and formality are major ingredients in speaking competently and yet they vary from culture to culture. Contrasts in verbal styles can lead to misunderstandings between people from different backgrounds.

Gudykunst (2005) describes three important types of cultural differences in verbal style:

1. *Direct versus indirect*. We've already discussed how low-context cultures use language primarily to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas directly, whereas high-context cultures may speak less directly, using language to maintain social harmony.
2. *Elaborate versus succinct or silent*. Speakers of Arabic commonly use language that is rich, expressive, and elaborate. By contrast, in many Native American cultures,

succinctness is relatively extreme, and silence is valued, especially in ambiguous social situations (Ferraro & Andreatta, 2012).

3. *Formal versus informal.* One guidebook for British readers who want to understand how Americans communicate describes the openness and informality that characterize U.S. culture:

> Visitors may be overwhelmed by the sheer exuberant friendliness of Americans, especially in the central and southern parts of the country. Sit next to an American on an airplane and he will immediately address you by your first name, ask "So—how do you like it in the States?," explain his recent divorce in intimate detail, invite you home for dinner, offer to lend you money, and wrap you in a warm hug on parting. This does not necessarily mean he will remember your name the next day. Americans are friendly because they just can't help it; they like to be neighbourly and want to be liked. (Faul, 2008)

Apologies offer another example of cultural differences in verbal codes (Kotani, 2016). In Japanese culture, "I'm sorry" is a necessary part of acknowledging a mistake (such as tardiness), and it might be said several times. Its primary meaning is "I'm sorry *you* were inconvenienced," with a focus on the other person's feelings. Offering explanations is viewed as making excuses, and that's bad form. The governing code is to apologize profusely, then move on. For English-speaking Americans, "I'm sorry" is an admission of responsibility. If the phrase is used, it's typically followed by an explanation—often a lengthy one. The goal behind expressing regret is to gain forgiveness ("That's okay") and perhaps dodge blame ("It was traffic's fault").

Verbal codes also operate closer to home, where people from different regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, generations, and

ethnic groups have distinct ways of speaking. You don't have to be a linguist to recognize distinctive codes such as regional jargon or teenage slang (Giles & Rakic, 2014). Consider how people could likely make accurate guesses about the co-culture(s) in which you were raised just by listening to you talk.

Code-Switching

Communicators often adapt their manner of speaking when they change contexts. Linguists call this practice call **code-switching** (Albarillo, 2018), a form of communication competence that increases the chances of achieving your goals. One U.S. expat living in Ireland offered an amusing account of how switching codes to sound more like a local helped save money (Thompson, 2013):

> We noticed there were often two prices for goods and services—reasonable prices for the locals and much more expensive costs for others (Americans). It was not easy, but I practiced my Irish accent until we qualified for "local pricing."

Shifting between codes doesn't require rejecting your heritage. Think of it as a type of bilingual ability. A first-generation student from rural Appalachia described feeling out of place at a state university when she used expressions common to her region, such as "holler" and "dicker" (Landecker, 2016). A course on language diversity, however, encouraged her to embrace her home dialect (form of language). Although she might have opted to code-switch at times, she would be making that choice without feeling shame about her roots.

For certain co-cultures, however, code-switching is a far more serious matter as it involves “adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities” (McCluney et al., 2019). Black Americans, most notably, often adopt mainstream white speech mannerisms to appear more acceptable:

> We learn early and often that the way we are in spaces with other black people is not the way we should be in professional circles. So the clipped words, slang and biting humor we use with friends becomes smoothed out. We take on a style that our white peers find safe and nonthreatening. (Bastien, 2016)

Even in social circles when dating interracially, some Black people describe adapting how they speak, act, or look as “second nature” (Holt, 2021).

"When I'm here, I'm Starr Version 2," says Starr Carter (Amandla Stenberg), describing how she code-switches at her mostly white high school in the film *The Hate U Give*. She believes she'd be judged harshly if she talked and behaved at her school the way she does in her Black neighborhood. ***Do you ever engage in code-switching? If so, how do you feel about it?*** View larger image

By now you should understand that verbal codes aren't "right" or "wrong"; they're simply reflections of different cultures. For more about the linguistic functions of code-switching, see Section 6.2.2 on "Affiliation."

3.4.2 Nonverbal Codes

Many elements of nonverbal communication are shared by all humans, regardless of culture (Matsumoto, 2006). For instance, people of all cultures convey messages through facial expressions and gestures. Furthermore, some of these physical displays have the same meaning everywhere. Crying is a universal sign of unhappiness or pain, and smiles signal friendly intentions. (Of course, smiles and tears may be insincere and manipulative, but their overt meanings are similar and constant in every culture.)

Despite nonverbal similarities, the range of differences in nonverbal behavior is tremendous. Consider the use of gestures such as the "OK" sign made by joining thumb and forefinger to form a circle. This gesture is a cheery affirmation to most Americans, but it has very different meanings in other parts of the world (Knapp & Hall, 2006; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). In France and Belgium, it means "you're worth zero"; in Japan, it means "money"; and in Greece and

Turkey, it is an insulting or vulgar sexual invitation. Given this sort of cross-cultural ambiguity, it's easy to visualize how a tourist from the United States could wind up in serious trouble overseas without understanding why.

Less obvious cross-cultural differences can damage relationships without the communicators ever recognizing exactly what has gone wrong (Beaulieu, 2004). For example, Anglo-Saxon people use the largest zone of personal space, followed by Eastern Asian people. People from the Mediterranean and Latin America use the closest distance. Imagine the awkward advance and retreat pattern that might occur when two diplomats or businesspeople from these cultures meet. Someone from Brazil might keep moving forward to close the gap, while someone from Japan would back away. Both would probably feel uncomfortable.

Like distance, patterns of eye contact vary around the world. Americans learn to maintain eye contact during conversations; avoiding it can be interpreted as insincerity or a sign of weakness. By contrast, in China a mutual gaze is appropriate only in close, interdependent relationships (Guo & Hu, 2013). In either case, deviations from the norm are likely to make a culturally uneducated listener uncomfortable. You'll read much more about cultural differences in nonverbal communication in Chapter 7.

3.4.3 Microaggressions

It's possible to communicate disrespect and disdain through subtle verbal or nonverbal displays. Known as **microaggressions**, these slights can create a hostile communication climate (Yep & Lescure, 2019). Microaggressions are typically aimed at marginalized co-cultures, and senders may be unaware of the message they're communicating. As one researcher who studies microaggressions targeting transgender individuals explains, "'Micro' is not meant to describe how the aggression is perceived, but rather how effortlessly it is delivered" (Howe, 2018).

Microaggressions are often related to racial bias (Kanter et al., 2020). They can be communicated in phrases like, "I didn't know your people acted that way," or perhaps by giving someone "the look" (see Watch and Discuss 3.1). But race isn't the only basis for microaggressions. Consider these examples: A student calls a difficult test "gay." A patient assumes the man in scrubs is a doctor and the woman in scrubs a nurse (and treats them differently). A salesclerk shouts at an older customer or one who is blind. A thin person gives an eye roll while waiting behind a heavier person in the buffet line.

Watch and Discuss 3.1: "P&G: The Look"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Identify the various ways in which *microaggressions* are communicated in this video.
2. Have you given "the look" to someone? Have you been on the receiving end? Discuss the power of nonverbal communication to communicate disdain.

Microaggressions may say more about the snubber than the snubbed. For instance, those most likely to direct microaggressions at gay people are straight men with a narrow view of male identity (Hall & LaFrance, 2012). Nevertheless, competent communicators strive for greater awareness of and accountability for microaggressions—because they can do serious interpersonal damage (Alinor, 2022). "It's death by a thousand cuts," says NiCole Buchanan, a microaggression workshop leader (Clay, 2017). "All these seemingly small events accumulate over time and can leave you just as bloody as if someone had stabbed you."

Researchers at a large Canadian university examined how East Asian, South Asian, Arab, Black, and Indigenous undergraduates reacted to racial microaggressions on a predominately white campus (Houshmand & Spanierman, 2021). One tactic involved ignoring the microaggression or withdrawing to protect themselves, particularly if the perpetrator was in a position of power. In a contrasting approach, students challenged the stereotype, exposing its false or hurtful assumptions (e.g., "No, we don't live in teepees on the

reservation”). In other instances, they would use humor to defuse tension, playing along (sometimes uncomfortably) with race-based jokes or even making them first. Many also sought solidarity in support networks and safe spaces such as an international students’ club or a First Nations center.

3.5 Developing Intercultural Communication Competence

What distinguishes competent from incompetent intercultural communicators? The rest of this chapter focuses on answering this question. But before getting to the answers, take a moment to complete the "Assessing Your Communication" quiz at the end of this chapter to evaluate your intercultural communication competence.

To a great degree, interacting successfully with people from different cultures calls for the same ingredients of general communicative competence outlined in Chapter 1. It's important to have a wide range of behaviors and to be skillful at choosing and performing the most appropriate ones in a given situation. A genuine concern for others plays an important role. Cognitive complexity and the ability to empathize also help, although empathizing with someone from another culture can be challenging (Cassels et al., 2010). Finally, self-monitoring is important because the need to make mid-course corrections in your approach is often necessary when dealing with people from other cultures.

But beyond these basic qualities, communication researchers have sought to identify qualities that are unique, or at least especially important, ingredients of intercultural communicative competence (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Dai & Chen, 2015).

3.5.1 Motivation and Attitude

The desire to communicate successfully with strangers is an important start. For example, people who are highly willing to communicate with people from other cultures report a greater number of friends from different backgrounds than those who are less willing to reach out (Kassing, 1997). But desire alone isn't sufficient (Arasaratnam, 2006). Some other ways of thinking described here are essential when dealing with people from other backgrounds (Samovar et al., 2007).

3.5.2 Tolerance for Ambiguity

As noted earlier, one of the most important concerns facing communicators is their desire to reduce uncertainty about one another (Berger, 1988; Gibbs et al., 2011). The level of uncertainty is especially high in an encounter of communicators from different cultures. Consider the basic challenge of communicating in an unfamiliar language. Pico Iyer (1990) captures the ambiguity that arises from a lack of fluency when he describes his growing friendship with Sachiko, a Japanese woman he met in Kyoto. Iyer tried to express his friendly affection for Sachiko but learned later that the word he used—*suki*—was "an almost naked protestation of love." That was not their only communication challenge:

> Once, when I had to leave her house ten minutes early, she said, "I very sad," and another time, when I simply called her up, she said, "I very happy"—and I began to think her unusually sensitive, or else prone to bold and violent extremes, when really

> she was reflecting nothing but the paucity of her English vocabulary. … Talking in a language not one's own was like walking on one leg; when two people did it together, it was like a three-legged waltz.

Competent intercultural communicators accept—even welcome—this kind of ambiguity. Iyer goes on to describe the way the mutual confusion he shared with Sachiko actually helped their relationship develop, a friendship that blossomed into a lifelong partnership (Altman, 2019):

> Yet in the end, the fact that we were both speaking in this pared-down diction made us both, I felt, somewhat gentler, more courteous, and more vulnerable than we would have been otherwise, returning us to a state of innocence.

Without a tolerance for ambiguity, the mass of often confusing and sometimes downright incomprehensible messages that bombard intercultural sojourners would be impossible to manage. Some people seem to come equipped with this sort of tolerance, while others have to cultivate it. One way or the other, that ability to live with uncertainty is an essential ingredient of intercultural communication competence (Gudykunst, 1993).

Watch and Discuss 3.2: "Momondo: The DNA Journey"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Identify the roles of *ethnocentrism* and *prejudice* in some of the comments made.
2. Discuss how learning about one's ancestry could assist intercultural communication.

3.5.3 Open-Mindedness

Being comfortable with ambiguity is important, but without an open-minded attitude a communicator will have trouble interacting competently with people from different backgrounds. To understand open-mindedness, it's helpful to consider two traits that are incompatible with it. **Ethnocentrism** is an attitude that one's own culture is superior to others. Ethnocentric people think—either privately or openly—that anyone who does not belong to their in-group is somehow strange, wrong, or even inferior. (See Watch and Discuss 3.2 for an example.) Travel writer Rick Steves (n.d.) describes how an ethnocentric point of view can interfere with respect for other cultural practices:

> We [Americans] consider ourselves very clean, but when we take baths, we use the same water for soaking, cleaning, and rinsing. (We wouldn't wash our dishes that way.) The Japanese, who use clean water for every step of the bathing process, might find our ways strange or even disgusting.
>
> Too often we judge the world in terms of "civilized" and "primitive." I was raised thinking the world was a pyramid with the US on top and everyone else was trying to get there. I was comparing people on their ability (or interest) in keeping up with us in material consumption, science, and technology. …

> Over the years, I've found that if we measure cultures differently (maybe according to stress, loneliness, heart attack rates, hours spent in traffic jams, or family togetherness), the results stack up differently. It's best not to fall into the "rating game." All societies are complex and highly developed in their own way.

Few things will open your mind to a foreign culture more than learning its language (Mafela, 2013). As Chapter 6 describes, every language carries with it a worldview—a way of understanding and talking about life's events. It's no surprise then that bilingualism is strongly linked to intercultural communication competence (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2016).

Ethnocentrism leads to an attitude of **prejudice**—an unfairly biased and intolerant attitude toward others who belong to an out-group. (Note that the root term in *prejudice* is "prejudge.") An important element of prejudice is stereotyping. Stereotypical prejudices include the obvious exaggerations that all women are emotional, all men are sex-crazed and insensitive goons, all older people are out of touch with reality, and all immigrants rely on government assistance. Stereotyping can even be a risk when it comes to knowledge of cultural characteristics such as individualism or collectivism. Not all members of a group are equally individualistic or collectivistic. For example, a close look at Americans of European and Latin descent showed differences within each group (Oetzel, 1998). Some Latinx Americans were more independent than some European Americans, and vice versa. Open-mindedness is especially important in intercultural work teams (Liu et al., 2018). Chapter 5 has more to say about stereotyping.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Using Your Voice to Confront Racism

Have you ever silently witnessed racist behavior and regretted your inaction? Although confronting such mistreatment is rarely easy, recent research shows that speaking out—as either an ingroup or outgroup member—can be the right thing to do.

Charles Chu and Leslie Ashburn-Nardo examined the dynamics of *allyship*: "actions that advantaged group members can take to improve the treatment or circumstances of a marginalized group." In their study, Black participants watched a slideshow in which a white coworker, after hearing of his colleague's son receiving an athletic scholarship, makes a stereotypical and prejudicial comment about Black men and athletic ability. Following this, participants saw either an ally (white coworker) or an in-group member (Black coworker) respond: "Sorry, but do you know how racist that sounds?" They also saw an outgroup member (white coworker) say nothing.

Not surprisingly, the participants were unhappy with the coworker who remained silent. They felt a boost in self-esteem when watching the white ally speak up, and even more when the Black coworker rose to the defense. What this suggests is that speaking out against racism is part of intercultural competence. Rather than responding with angry labels (e.g., "You racist bigot!"), it's important to assertively communicate your in-group allegiance and out-group allyship in the face of prejudice. (See Activities 3 and 4 at the end of the chapter for more on speaking up to prejudice.)

Chu, C., & Ashburn-Nardo, L. (2022). Black Americans' perspectives on ally confrontations of racial prejudice. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 101*, e104337.

3.5.4 Knowledge and Skill

Attitude alone isn't enough to guarantee success in intercultural encounters. Communicators need to possess enough knowledge of other cultures to know what approaches are appropriate. The ability to adapt to the norms of another culture or co-culture is an essential ingredient of intercultural communication competence (Senyshyn, 2019). Recognizing how significantly "cultural differences shape interpersonal communication," the United Nations has proposed key strategies in keeping with those discussed in this section to enhance cross-cultural interaction (Aririguzoh, 2022).

How can a communicator acquire the culture-specific information that leads to competence? One important element is what scholars label as *mindfulness*—awareness of one's own behavior and that of others (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). Communicators who lack this quality blunder through intercultural encounters *mindlessly*, oblivious of how their own behavior may confuse or offend others, and how behavior that they consider weird may be simply different. Formally studying a culture by taking courses or training seminars can help increase mindfulness, as can informal learning experiences such as traveling, reading international press, and having contact with people from different cultural groups (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

3.5.5 Patience and Perseverance

Becoming comfortable and competent in a new culture or co-culture may be ultimately rewarding, but the process isn't easy. After a "honeymoon" phase, it's typical to feel confused, disenchanted, lonesome, and homesick. To top it off, you may feel disappointed in yourself for not adapting as easily as you expected. This stage—which typically feels like a crisis—has acquired the labels *culture shock* or *adjustment shock*.

You wouldn't be the first person to be jolted by culture shock. When the university she had worked so hard to get into accepted Priyo (a pseudonym), she was excited—and overwhelmed to be living abroad in the United States (Anjalin et al., 2017). First, she was caught off guard by American accents when she had expected British English. She then found herself feeling deeply lonely among neighbors she did not know. While she respected their need for privacy and personal space, she missed the strong sense of community and family ties of her collectivistic Asian culture.

Communication theorist Young Yum Kim (2015) has studied cultural adaptation extensively. She says it's natural to feel a sense of push and pull between the familiar and the novel. Kim encourages sojourners to regard stress as a good sign. It means they have the potential to adapt and grow. With patience, the sense of crisis begins to wane and, and once again, there's energy and enthusiasm to learn more.

Communication can be a challenge while you're learning how to operate in new cultures, but it can also be a solution. Eventually Priyo, the Asian student adapting to life in America, overcame her initial fear of saying something inappropriate or impolite. She began to attend campus events, make friends, and connect with faculty. Looking back, Priyo credits her five years abroad with helping her develop independence and making her the person she is today.

The transition from culture shock to adaptation and growth is usually successful, but it isn't a smooth, linear process. Instead, people tend to take two steps forward and one step back and to repeat that pattern many times. Kim (2008) calls this a "draw back and leap" pattern. Above all, she says, if people are patient and they keep trying, the rewards are worth it.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 3.1 **Explain the relationship between intercultural and interpersonal dimensions of communication.**

The growing diversity of U.S. culture at home and the increased exposure to people from around the world make an understanding of intercultural communication essential. In a diverse society, interpersonal encounters are marked by degrees of cultural and co-cultural salience.

Q: What are the most salient intercultural differences you are likely to encounter in your interpersonal relationships?

Objective 3.2 **Describe five key values that help shape a culture's communication norms.**

When members of different cultures interact, their values can affect interaction in ways that may be felt but not understood. These values include an emphasis on high- or low-context communication, individualism or collectivism, high or low power distance, relatively more or less avoidance of uncertainty, and either achievement or nurturing.

Q: What key values characterize the culture in which you communicate most comfortably?

Q: What communication challenges arise when you communicate with people with different values?

Objective 3.3 **Recognize the range of co-cultures in today's society and how co-cultural factors can affect interpersonal communication.**

Within any society, people belong to a variety of co-cultures, each of which carries its own identity and operates with its own set of communication rules. Some co-cultures include ethnicity and race, gender identity and sexual orientation, age/generation, and socioeconomic status.

Q: What co-cultures do you belong to, and what rules govern communication within these groups? How do these rules differ for members of other co-cultures you are likely to encounter?

Q: How can you best manage your communication with members of other co-cultures?

Objective 3.4 **Explain the factors that shape a culture's verbal and nonverbal codes.**

The codes that members of a culture use are often the most recognizable factors that shape communication between people from different backgrounds. Verbal codes include language

spoken and the worldview created by it, as well as verbal communication style. Nonverbal codes also differ significantly, as do the attributions that cultural conditioning generates. Microaggressions are subtle verbal or nonverbal displays that communicate disrespect, even if it was not intended.

Q: Describe a set of cultural values, norms, and codes different from yours that could result in different cultural communication patterns.

Objective 3.5 **Identify the attitudes, knowledge, and skills required for intercultural communication competence.**

Intercultural communicative competence involves five dimensions: motivation and attitude, tolerance for ambiguity, open-mindedness, knowledge and skill, and patience and perseverance.

Q: Explain how you can apply the guidelines for intercultural competence in this chapter when interacting with people of cultural backgrounds different from your own.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Reflection:** Take a moment to identify your co-cultural memberships (Section 3.1). What in-groups do you belong to? (See if you can name 5–10.) Then identify several co-cultures you encounter to which you *don't* belong. Based on your observations, consider the criteria you and others in your life use to define in- and out-groups. Do they involve ethnicity? Gender? Age? Physical traits? Lifestyle? Belief systems? How does in- and out-group membership affect your communication with others?
2. **Self-Appraisal:** As Section 3.1.4 notes, it's possible to have different values and norms from others in your culture. With that in mind, review the definitions and descriptions in Section 3.2 and assess how you identify on these measures:
    a. High-context or low-context
    b. Individualistic or collectivistic
    c. High or low power distance
    d. Uncertainty avoidant or embracing
    e. Achievement-oriented or nurturing

    Does your personal style of communication differ from stereotypes for your groups?

3. **Ethical Challenge:** The Focus on Research box near Section 3.5.3 describes the value of taking a stand against prejudice. Do you believe you are ethically obligated to speak up whenever you see others being treated unfairly? Is it ever ethically acceptable *not* to speak up? If so, when and why?
4. **Build Your Skill:** If you decide to take a stand against prejudice (see previous activity), consider how you might do so. Write out responses you could give to offensive comments made by:
    a. a classmate during a class session
    b. the instructor during a class session
    c. a relative at a family dinner
    d. a friend in a group at a party

Keeping in mind the competence maxim of being both *effective* and *appropriate*, consider

- what you could say
- how you would say it (e.g., tone of voice, other nonverbal cues)
- when and where you would speak up (e.g., immediately or later, in public or in private)

Assessing Your Communication: What Is Your Intercultural Communication Competence? (Personal Practice)

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

achievement culture

co-cultural theory

co-culture

code-switching

collectivistic cultures

culture

Ethnicity

Ethnocentrism

high-context culture

individualistic culture

In-groups

Intercultural communication

intersectionality

low-context culture

microaggressions

nurturing culture

out-groups

power distance

prejudice

Race

salience

social identity

uncertainty avoidance

CHAPTER 3 Flashcards

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4

Interpersonal Communication and the Self

Ronald B. Adler

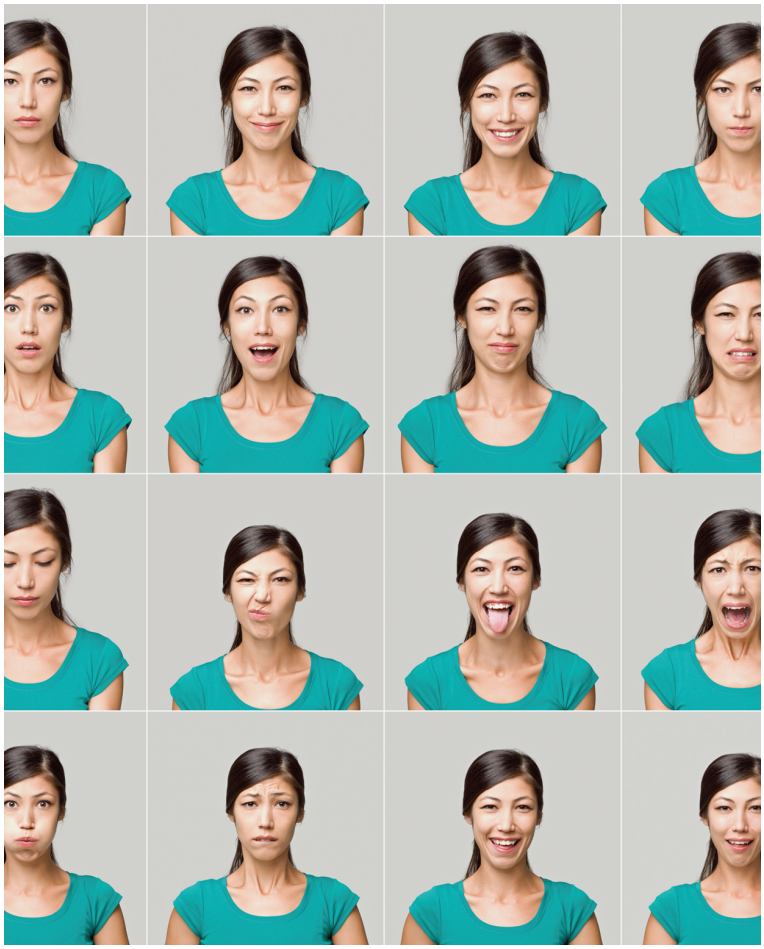
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II

Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh

Arizona State University



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

4.1 **Describe how the self-concept is subjective and is shaped by, and consequently affects, communication with others.**

4.2 **Explain how you manage impressions in person and online to enhance your presenting image.**

4.3 Identify an optimal level of self-disclosure and non-disclosure in effective relationships.

WHO ARE YOU? Before reading on, take a few minutes to try a simple exercise. First, make a list of the 10 words or phrases that describe the most important features of who you are. Some may be social roles (student, caregiver). Some may be physical characteristics (athletic, tall), others intellectual (smart, inquisitive). Perhaps you can best define yourself in terms of your common moods, feelings, or attitudes (optimistic, critical). Or you could consider your social characteristics (outgoing, defensive). You may highlight belief systems (pacifist, vegetarian). Maybe your work is an important part of who you are (barista, teacher). Finally, you could focus on particular skills (swimmer, artist). In any case, choose 10 words or phrases that best describe you and write them down. Next, reorder your list, ranking the 10 items from most to least fundamental to your identity.

4.1 Communication and the Self-Concept

The list you created in this exercise offers clues about your **self-concept**: the relatively stable set of perceptions you hold of yourself. Imagine a mirror that reflected not only your appearance but other aspects of who you are— your typical emotional states, special talents, likes, dislikes, values, roles, and so on. That reflection would be your self-concept.

Note that any description you constructed in this exercise is only a partial one. Even if you added hundreds of words, it could never be complete, and it will change somewhat over time. Of course, not every facet of your self-concept is equally important, and the types of descriptions that are most important vary from person to person. For example, the most significant part of one person's self-concept might consist of social roles, whereas for another it might be physical appearance or accomplishments.

Self-esteem is the part of the self-concept that involves evaluations of self-worth. Your self-concept might include being quiet, argumentative, or serious. How you *feel* about these qualities determines your self-esteem.

Self-esteem evaluations begin at a young age (Cvencek et al., 2016) and have a powerful, cyclical effect on communication behavior, as Figure 4.1 shows. People who feel good about themselves typically expect to receive positive evaluations from others (Araiza & Freitas, 2019). These positive expectations increase the chance that communication will be successful, and successes contribute to positive self-evaluations, which reinforce self-esteem (Wagner et al., 2018). Of course, the same principle can work in a negative cycle. One study found that people with low self-esteem don't fare well on social networking sites (Forest & Wood, 2012): They tend to post more negative information, and people are less likely to respond to downbeat messages. What could be a tool for connecting with others can thus perpetuate low self-esteem.

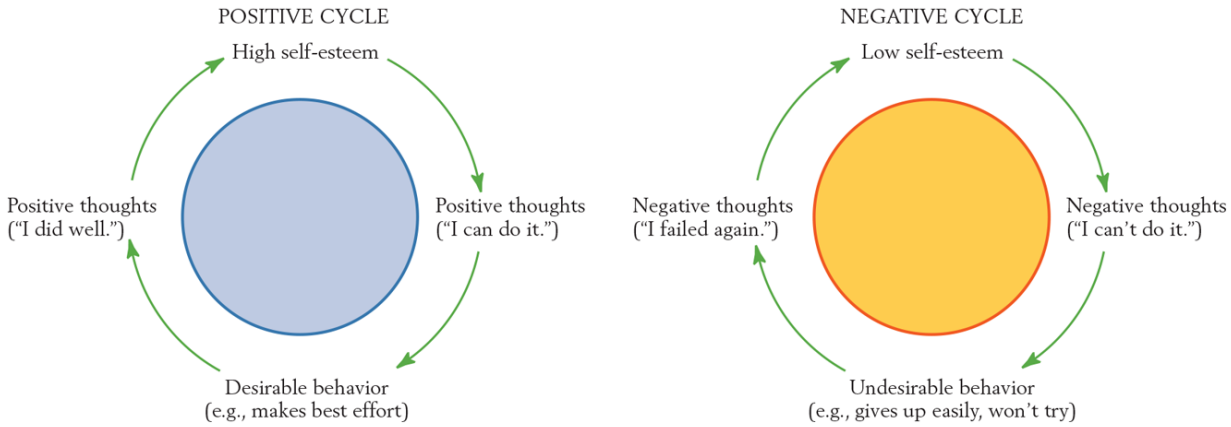


FIGURE 4.1 The Communication/Perception Feedback Loop View larger image

Although high self-esteem has obvious benefits, it doesn't guarantee interpersonal success. People with high self-esteem may *think* they make better impressions on others and have better friendships and romantic lives, but neither impartial observers nor objective tests

verify these beliefs (Baumeister & Vohs, 2018). It's easy to see how people with an inflated sense of self-worth could irritate others by coming across as condescending know-it-alls. Moreover, people with low self-esteem have the potential to change their self-appraisals. The point here is that positive self-evaluations can often be the starting point for positive communication with others.

4.1.1 How the Self-Concept Develops

Researchers generally agree that self-concept does not exist at birth (Coughlin & Robins, 2017). At about 6 or 7 months of age, infants begin to recognize "self" as distinct from surroundings. If you've ever watched children at this age, you've probably marveled at how they can stare with great fascination at their own foot or hand, almost as if these were strange objects belonging to someone else. Then the connection is made: "The foot is me," "The hand is me." These first revelations form the child's earliest concept of self.

As the child develops, this rudimentary sense of identity expands into a much more complete and sophisticated picture that resembles the self-concept of adults. This evolution is almost totally a product of social interaction (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Two complementary theories describe how interaction with others shapes the way individuals view themselves: reflected appraisal and social comparison.

Reflected Appraisal

Now try the following exercise. First, recall someone who helped enhance your self-esteem by acting in a way that made you feel accepted, worthwhile, important, appreciated, or loved. For instance, you might recall a childhood teacher who took time to encourage you specifically. Next, recall someone who acted in either a big or small way to diminish your self-esteem, such as a coach who criticized you in front of the team.

After thinking about these two types of interactions, you should begin to see that everyone's self-concept is to some degree a **reflected appraisal**: a mirroring of others' judgments (Asencio, 2013). To the extent that you have received supportive messages, you have learned to appreciate and value yourself. Receiving critical signals, on the other hand, can make you feel less valuable, lovable, and capable. In part, your self-concept is a reflection of the messages you've received throughout your life—both in person and via social media (Wallace & Tice, 2012).

Social scientists use the term **significant other** to describe a person whose evaluations are especially influential (Forster et al., 2019). Messages from parents, guardians, or other primary caregivers are an early and important influence on the self-concept. Supportive parents are more likely than unsupportive ones to raise children with stable self-concepts and high self-esteem (Orth, 2018). Unfortunately, not all parental messages are positive. For instance, daughters exposed to "fat talk" from their mothers often develop body image issues, sometimes resulting in eating disorders

(Lydecker et al., 2018). Beyond family members, many other people shape the self-concept. Teachers, friends, romantic partners, coaches, and even some acquaintances can all leave an imprint on how you view yourself—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse.

You might argue that not every part of your self-concept is shaped by others. After all, nobody needs to tell you whether you are tall, have curly hair, and so on. Indeed, some features of the self are immediately apparent. But the *significance* you attach to them can depend greatly on others' opinions. When key people in your life endorse certain attributes ("You play piano so well!") and diminish others ("I don't think sports are for you"), that can have an impact on your self-concept ("I am a musician"; "I am not an athlete"). (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for a reflection on people who shaped your self-concept.)

1. How do selfies reflect and affect one's *self-concept*?
2. Discuss the relationship between *self-esteem* and *social comparison* in the taking and posting of selfies. Do you think adolescents need #TheSelfieTalk?

Note: See " Dove Evolution" for an earlier video related to models and social comparison.

Social Comparison

So far, we have looked at the way others' messages shape one's self-concept and self-esteem. In addition to using these messages, the self-image is shaped by the process of **social comparison**: evaluating ourselves in comparison with others (Gerber et al., 2018). We decide whether we are superior or inferior (which influences your self-esteem) and similar or different (which influences your self-concept) by comparing ourselves to what social scientists call **reference groups**—others against whom you evaluate your own characteristics (Nickerson, 2022).

You might feel ordinary or inferior in terms of talent, friendships, or attractiveness if you compare yourself with an inappropriate reference group. For instance, studies have shown that young women who regularly compare themselves with ultra-thin models develop negative appraisals of their own bodies, resulting in lowered confidence (Arroyo, 2015; McComb & Mills, 2021). Young men, too, who compare themselves to media-idealized male physiques evaluate their bodies negatively (Paulson, 2020).

People also use others' online profiles as points of comparison, and they may feel less attractive, successful, and happy after doing so (Baker et al., 2019). In particular, social media comparisons can lead to lowered self-esteem and even depression (Faelens et al., 2019). One study found you're more likely to feel depressed when comparing yourself on Instagram with strangers than with people you know (Lup et al., 2015). That's because it's easier to believe the glamorous online portrayals of those you haven't met in person. With

friends and family, you're more aware of the warts and bumps of their everyday lives. Experts suggest it's wise to limit following strangers on social media, and to keep in mind that their lives aren't as perfect as they may seem.

To some degree, you can control your reference groups. It's possible to seek out people with whom you compare more favorably (de los Santos et al., 2019). For instance, you might decide that it's foolish to constantly compare your athletic prowess with that of professionals or your looks with those of movie stars. Once you place yourself alongside a truly representative sample, your self-concept may become more realistic—and your self-esteem may improve as a result.

4.1.2 Characteristics of the Self-Concept

Now that you have a better idea of how your self-concept has developed, we can take a closer look at some of its characteristics.

The Self-Concept Is Subjective

The way we view ourselves may be at odds with others' perceptions—and often with the observable facts. Sometimes we have unrealistically favorable self-appraisals. One study found that some online daters seem to have a "foggy mirror"—that is, they see themselves more positively than others do (Ellison et al., 2012).

The tendency to overrate oneself occurs offline as well. Most Americans have fairly high self-esteem, and therefore rate themselves as generally "above average" (Levy, 2019). In a classic study (Myers, 1980), college students were asked to rank themselves on their ability to get along with others. Defying mathematical laws, all subjects—every last one of more than 800,000—put themselves in the top half of the population. A total of 60 percent rated themselves in the top 10 percent of the population, and an amazing 25 percent believed they were in the top 1 percent. These students had similarly lofty appraisals of their leadership and athletic abilities.

There are also times when we view ourselves more harshly than the facts warrant. We have all experienced a temporary case of the "uglies," convinced we look much worse than others would say we appear. Although everyone suffers occasional bouts of low self-esteem, some people suffer from long-term or even permanent states of excessive self-doubt and criticism. These self-defeating patterns can of course influence interpersonal communication. Persons with low self-esteem may try to elicit support from others by displaying sadness, sulking, or whining—but that often backfires and leads to rejection rather than connection (Don et al., 2019).

Self-evaluations can be distorted for several reasons:

- *Obsolete information*. The effects of past failures in school or social relations can linger long after they have occurred, even though such events don't predict failure in the future. Likewise, your past successes don't guarantee future success.
- *Distorted feedback*. The remarks of overly critical parents, cruel classmates, uncaring teachers, excessively demanding employers, or even rude strangers can have a lasting effect. Other distorted messages are unrealistically positive. For instance, a child's inflated ego may be based on the praise of doting parents, and a boss's inflated ego may come from the overblown praise of fawning subordinates.
- *Perfectionism*. From the time most of us learn to understand language, we are exposed to models who appear to be perfect. The implicit message is: "A well-adjusted, successful person has no faults." The naive belief in perfection—either your own or others'—can distort the self-concept.

- *Social expectations*. You probably want to be seen as successful, but also humble. There's often a trade-off between self-promotion and modesty (Scopelliti et al., 2015). Sharing your accomplishments might lead other people to see you as a braggart or egotist. As a result, many people opt to talk freely about (and dwell on) their shortcomings while downplaying their accomplishments.

A Healthy Self-Concept Is Flexible

People change. Shy children might turn into outgoing adults. Moody teenagers can become upbeat professionals. Carefree young adults may later adopt more responsible roles of parenthood as core components of their identity. As people evolve, so do their self-concepts (Strimbu & O'Connell, 2019).

Your self-concept is also flexible across contexts. You might be a relaxed conversationalist with people you know but at a loss for words with strangers. The self-concepts of most communicators react to these changes ("I'm patient at work," "I'm not patient at home"), and these changes affect self-esteem ("I'm not as good a person at home as I am in the office").

Think back to your list of self-descriptions from the exercise at the beginning of the chapter. How many were true of you 5 to 10 years ago? Which do you think will still be true 5 to 10 years from now? It's helpful for communicators to take stock of themselves now and then and acknowledge changes to their self-concept.

A Healthy Self-Concept Is Multifaceted

Self-help gurus often advise followers to get in touch with their "true selves." But that's an oversimplification. Like a diamond, the self-concept is composed of many facets (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Some are large and readily visible, while others are small and hidden below the surface. Each represents a distinct—and quite real—piece of who you are. Your genuine kindness might represent a large facet that you display in most situations. But perhaps you're sometimes unkind when under stress or treated badly. As you will soon read, the key to embracing your multifaceted self-concept lies in learning how and when to present the various facets in different roles and contexts.

The Self-Concept Resists Change

To be realistic, a self-concept should reflect the way you change over time, but it often does not. You may resist revising it and even seek out people who confirm how you see yourself—a phenomenon known as *cognitive conservatism* (Church et al., 2012). Most people, for example, are understandably reluctant to revise a favorable self-perception. If you were a thoughtful, romantic partner early in a relationship, it would be hard to admit that you might have become less considerate and attentive lately. Likewise, if you consider yourself an "A" student but receive an "F" on a paper, you may question the instructor's assessment rather than the quality of your own work.

Curiously, the tendency to cling to an outmoded self-perception holds even when the new image would be more favorable (Emery et al., 2015). For example, some of our former students still view themselves as underachievers despite being successful on several measures. Some people have difficulty receiving and believing compliments about who they have become (Kille et al., 2017). People with unnecessarily negative self-esteem can become their own worst enemies, denying themselves the validation and support they deserve (see the Focus on Research in Section 13.2.2 for an example).

If you're in need of a self-concept change, the best prescription is to surround yourself with significant others who offer you accurate, affirming messages about who you are and who you're becoming (Parise et al., 2019)—and then soak up those messages (Merolla et al., 2022). The shift might occur slowly, but over time you'll likely begin reflecting their appraisals.

4.1.3 The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Communication

Self-concept is such a powerful influence on the personality that it can affect your future behavior and that of others. A **self-fulfilling prophecy**occurs when a person's expectations of an event, and subsequent behavior based on those expectations, make the expected outcome more likely to occur (Ackerman, 2022). As you saw in the discussion surrounding Figure 4.1, this circular process involves four stages:

1. Holding an expectation (for yourself or for others)
2. Behaving in accordance with that expectation
3. The expectation coming to pass
4. Reinforcing the original expectation

Types of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

There are two types of self-fulfilling prophecies. First, your own expectations can influence your behavior (Franco, 2022). For instance, if you expect people will like you when you first meet them (Stage 1), you'll act more warmly (Stage 2) and enhance the potential that you'll indeed be liked. Simply telling yourself, "I'm likeable" and then behaving accordingly can help make it so.

"I don't sing because I am happy. I am happy because I sing."

Second, one person's expressed expectations can affect another's behavior. A classic example is described in Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson's book *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (1968; see also Hill & Jones, 2021). Experimenters told teachers that 20 percent of the children in a certain elementary school showed unusual potential for intellectual growth. In fact, the names of the 20 percent had been selected randomly. Eight months later these children showed significantly greater scholastic achievements. They did better not because they were any more intelligent or capable than their classmates, but because their teachers treated them differently and brought their expectations to pass.

It isn't just an observer's *belief* that creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for another person. The observer—whether a parent, employer, or teacher— must *communicate that belief* verbally or nonverbally for the prediction to have any effect. In this sense, the self-fulfilling prophecies imposed by one person on another are as much a communication phenomenon as a psychological one.

4.2 Presenting the Self

So far, you've seen how communication shapes the way communicators view *themselves*. Now it's time to focus on **impression management**—the communication strategies people use to influence how *others* view them (Ledbetter & Herbert, 2022). In the following pages, you will see that many of your messages are aimed at creating desired impressions.

4.2.1 Public Self and Private Self

To understand why impression management exists, it's necessary to discuss the notion of self in more detail. As you know by now, the self-concept is both flexible and multifaceted. The way you communicate about yourself therefore depends on the context. For example, most people behave differently in private versus in public settings. That low-fat yogurt you eat while others are watching might get replaced by a greasy burger if you're home alone (Cheng et al., 2015).

The **perceived self** is the person you believe yourself to be, though it may not be accurate in every respect. You might consider yourself to be a friendly person, but are you friendly in all situations, and to what extent? You are unlikely to reveal every dimension of your

private self, although the chances of disclosure increase in close relationships. For example, you might be reluctant to share some feelings about your appearance ("I think I'm rather unattractive"), your goals ("The most important thing to me is becoming rich"), or your motives ("I care more about myself than about others").

In contrast to the perceived self, the **presenting self** is a public image—the way you want to appear to others. In most cases the presenting self is a socially approved image: diligent student, loving partner, conscientious worker, and so on. Your public image likely shifts depending on the context. You might be fun-loving with your friends, yet more intellectual in front of your professors. You may even present different images for different friendships: for some

you're a trash-talker, but with others you're serious and quiet. Impression management involves selectively displaying or concealing facets of yourself to communicate your desired image within a particular context.

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959, 1983) used the word **face** to describe this socially approved identity, and he coined the term **facework** to describe verbal and nonverbal ways to maintain an image. Goffman argued that each of us can be viewed as both a playwright and an actor, creating and portraying roles we want others to believe. This "playwriting" starts early in life as children interact with their parents (Gerholm, 2011), and it continues into adulthood. Goffman suggested that each of us maintains face by putting on a *front* when around others we want to impress. In contrast, your *backstage* behavior—when you're alone or with a different audience—may be quite different. Consider how servers talk to customers on the restaurant floor—and how their communication often changes when backstage in the kitchen with coworkers.

Everyone has backstage ways of acting that they don't exhibit in the presence of others. Just think of how you behave in front of the bathroom mirror when the door is locked and you will appreciate the difference between public and private behavior. If you knew someone was watching, would you behave differently? Does it matter if that person is a stranger? Your boss? Your best friend?

4.2.2 Characteristics of Impression Management

Now that you have a sense of what impression management is, it's time to look at some characteristics of this process.

We Strive to Manage a Multifaceted Identity

It is an oversimplification to suggest that people adopt the same impression management strategies across all situations. In the course of even a single day, most people play a variety of roles: "respectful student," "joking friend," "kind neighbor," and "helpful worker," to suggest just a few. Even within one relationship, you might play a variety of roles. As you grew up, you almost certainly changed characters as you interacted with your parents. In one context you acted as the responsible adult ("I will pick up groceries on my way home"), and at another time you were the helpless child ("I can't find my socks!"). Likewise, in romantic relationships, partners switch among many ways of behaving, depending on the context: friend, lover, business partner, critic, and so on.

Some portions of your multifaceted identity might be conflicting at times (McEwan, 2015). For example, some student-athletes experience tension when the roles of student and athlete seem to have incompatible demands (Wendling et al., 2018). Most people seek to be perceived as warm (friendly, trustworthy) and competent (intelligent, skillful), yet those two impressions may be incompatible (Holoien & Fiske, 2013). Thus, people often "play dumb" when the

goal is to be liked, and they become overly critical when the goal is to look smart. Balancing these two impressions is a skillful act.

In the film *The Avengers: Endgame*, Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) finally embraces The Hulk as part of his multifaceted identity. He learns to choose which facets—such as Bruce's level-headedness and The Hulk's strength—to display in various contexts. But they're both "him."
View larger image

As noted earlier, the multifaceted nature of your self-concept makes it tempting to regard some of your identity displays as more authentic than others. However, it's more accurate to recognize that all of them are you in various roles (Tracy & Town, 2020). Each role allows you to display certain facets of yourself. You may not enjoy groveling to the boss or placating an angry customer, but that doesn't

make those behaviors “not you.” Instead, it means you’re playing the role of “respectful employee” or “dedicated server” in ways that you (and perhaps society) deem appropriate. With this in mind, it’s important to remember that competent communicators are multifaceted people with a variety of roles and identities—all of which are “you.”

Impression Management Is Collaborative

As you perform the many facets of your identity, note that the members of your audience are trying to create their own characters. Identity-related communication is a kind of improvisation in which your character reacts with others. Good-natured teasing only works if the other person appreciates your humor and responds well. Likewise, being romantic can succeed only if the object of your affections plays a complementary part.

Impression Management Can Be Deliberate or Unconscious

People manage impressions more carefully and strategically in some contexts than in others. Most job interviews and first dates are clear examples of deliberate impression management, requiring conscious effort to maintain appearances (Dominguez et al., 2020). But in other cases communicators unconsciously act in ways that are performances for others. For example, in a classic experiment, participants expressed facial disgust in reaction to eating sandwiches laced with saltwater only when there was another person present;

when they were alone, they made no faces (Brightman et al., 1975). Another study showed that communicators engage in facial mimicry (such as smiling or looking sympathetic in response to another's message) only in face-to-face settings, when their expressions can be seen by the other person. When they are speaking over the phone and their reactions cannot be seen, they do not make the same expressions (Chovil, 1991). Studies such as these suggest that much of our behavior is aimed at sending messages to others—in other words, impression management.

@WORK

Impression Management in the Workplace

Some advisors encourage workers to "bring your whole self" to the job (Paul, 2022). But there are times when disclosing certain information about your personal life can be damaging (Gibson, 2018; Gignac et al., 2021). This is especially true for people with "invisible stigmas"—traits that run the risk of being viewed unfavorably (Butler & Modaff, 2016; Jones & King, 2014).

As you consider how to manage your identity at work, take the following into account:

- *Proceed with caution.* In an ideal world, it would be safe to reveal ourselves without hesitation. But in real life, total candor can have consequences, so it may be best to move slowly.

- *Assess the organization's culture.* If your workplace seems supportive and welcoming, then revealing more of yourself may be safe.
- *Consider the consequences of not opening up.* Keeping an important part of your identity secret can also take an emotional toll (Sawyer et al., 2017).
- *Test the waters.* Think about asking a trusted colleague or mentor for advice. But realize that secrets can be leaked, so be sure the person you approach can keep confidences.

4.2.3 Face-to-Face Impression Management

In face-to-face interaction, communicators can manage their front in three ways: manner, appearance, and setting. *Manner* consists of a communicator's words and nonverbal actions. Chapters 6 and 7 describe in detail how what you say and do creates impressions. Because you have to speak and act, the question isn't whether your manner sends a message; rather, it's whether the message is intentional.

A second dimension of impression management is *appearance*—the personal items (e.g., clothing, watches, glasses) people use to shape an image. A physician's white lab coat and a police officer's uniform communicate the wearers' lines of work. In the business world, a

freshly pressed tailored suit creates a very different impression from a rumpled casual outfit. Off the job, clothing is just as important. People dressed in upper-middle-class fashion have a very different experience shopping than those in lower-class fashion (Aliakbari & Abdolahi, 2013). The clothes you wear, the car you drive, and the place where you live all send messages: "I'm wealthy," "I'm stylish," "I'm sexy," "I'm athletic," and so on.

A final way to manage impressions is through the choice of *setting*—use of the physical environment to influence how others view us (Eckel, 2018). The physical setting you choose and the way you arrange it help manage impressions. How do you decorate your living space? What artwork is on your walls? What music do you play? You might eat most meals on a paper plate yet select a fancy restaurant to impress your date. Likewise, you might clean your room only when your parents come to visit. Most people choose settings they enjoy but also create environments that present a desired front. (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for a self-appraisal of your impression management skills.)

4.2.4 Impression Management in Mediated Communication

Impression management is just as pervasive and important in mediated communication as in face-to-face interaction. At first glance, communication technologies might seem to inhibit communicators' ability to manage impressions. Channels such as

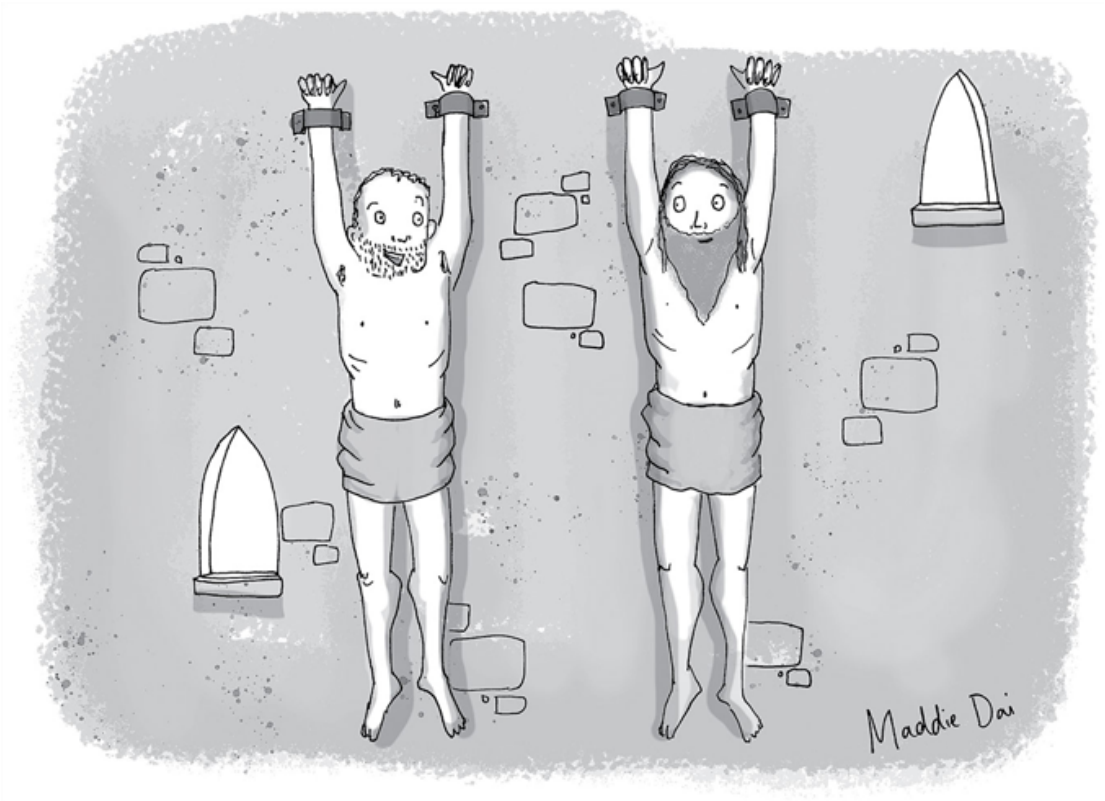
text messaging and email lack many nonverbal cues. But as you read in Chapter 2, lean mediated channels can actually be an advantage for communicators who want to manage the impressions they make (Sherblom, 2020). They don't have to worry about how they look, the smoothness of their speech, or whether they're rolling their eyes as they type a message.

As you also learned in Chapter 2, the asynchronicity of most digital correspondence allows a sender to say difficult things without forcing the receiver to respond immediately. This can permit a receiver to ignore a message rather than give an unpleasant response. Likewise, time lags allow mediated communicators to carefully craft and edit their messages before hitting "send" (Strimbu & O'Connell, 2019). Options like these show that mediated communication can serve as a tool for impression management at equal or superior levels to face-to-face communication (Sumner & Ramirez, 2017).

Social networking profiles provide a range of opportunities for their creators to manage impressions (Duffy & Chan, 2019). Consider how featuring or withholding the following kinds of information affects how others might regard your online profile: age, personal photo, educational or career accomplishments, sexual orientation, job title, personal interests, personal philosophy and religious beliefs, and organizations to which you belong (Doster, 2013). It's also possible to present yourself differently on different platforms. Here's how a *New York Times* article described one person's impression management on dating apps:

> Her profile on Tinder, for instance, includes pictures of her out at bars, drinking and partying. On Hinge, it's pictures of her at brunch, usually in a nice, "dressed up" outfit.

> "While I do code-switch, I'm still the same person," she said. "You get the same attitude, whether or not you see me being a little bit more fun and free, or you see me being a little bit more classy and mature. Those are two sides of the same coin." (Cherelus, 2023)



"Well, if it's any consolation, your social media makes it look like you're absolutely thriving."

When undergraduates were asked how they think they come across in their social media profiles (Toma & Carlson, 2015), most acknowledged that their self-presentations are highly positive—but not *too* positive. In general, they believed their profiles portrayed them as better than reality on certain dimensions (e.g., "funny," "adventurous," "outgoing"), accurately on other dimensions (e.g., "physically attractive," "creative"), and worse than reality on yet

other dimensions (e.g., “intelligent,” “polite,” “reliable”). It appears the participants realized—perhaps intuitively—that social media posts are an exercise in impression management.

Viewing your online presence from another perspective can be a valuable impression management exercise. Enter your name in a search engine and see what pops up. You may decide it’s time to engage in what researchers call “reputation management” (Joyce, 2016). Perhaps you’ll want to change privacy settings on your profiles, customize who can see certain updates, and delete unwanted information about yourself, if you can.

4.2.5 Impression Management and Honesty

At first glance, impression management might sound like an academic label for manipulation or phoniness. There certainly are situations where people misrepresent themselves to gain the trust of others (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). A manipulative date who pretends to be affectionate to gain sexual favors is clearly unethical and deceitful. So are job applicants who lie about their academic records to get hired or salespeople who pretend to be dedicated to customer service when their real goal is purely financial.

In most settings, however, impression management involves balancing the desire to be honest with the goal of maintaining a positive face. For instance, most people focus on positive features and omit or downplay negative details from their online profiles

(Markowitz & Hancock, 2018). But some people veer too far from reality when attempting to create a positive impression online. Fortunately, online daters tend to be skeptical of profiles that seem too good to be true (Heck & Krueger, 2016). Candidates who present themselves in honest and even humble ways are generally perceived as more attractive than those who come off as braggers (Wotipka & High, 2016).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Managing Impressions of Motherhood

> *I thought I would be this perfect organized Pinterest mother who made organic baby food and exercised every day. Not my reality. It's just nothing like I thought.*

Do depictions of motherhood on social media lead to unrealistic expectations for moms? Jocelyn DeGroot and Tennley Vik

surveyed mothers of young children and learned that many believe social media promotes "the flawless performance of motherhood."

The researchers analyzed open-ended responses about mothering from 136 moms. Most participants said they felt an obligation to project a positive self-image and avoid sharing challenges online. One mom put it this way:

> *We're conditioned to share the good stuff. We weigh our lives against the lives of others on Facebook and Twitter. We don't dare talk about the hard stuff. That would mean we're failing compared to the happy pictures in our news feed.*

This creates a toxic double-bind for moms. They know the perfect depictions they see online don't tell the whole motherhood story, yet they feel pressure to keep up the ruse on their own social media posts.

DeGroot and Vik say it's long past time "to start having public, authentic conversations about the challenges of motherhood." To use impression management terms, moms need to let other moms see what goes on backstage, behind their frontstage performances. And maybe post more photos like the one in this sidebar.

DeGroot, J. M., & Vik, T. A. (2021). "Fake smile. Everything is under control.": The flawless performance of motherhood. *Western Journal of Communication*, *85*, 42–60. *See also* Kirkpatrick, C. E., & Lee, S. (2022). Comparisons to picture-perfect motherhood: How Instagram's idealized portrayals of motherhood affect new mothers' well-being. *Computers in Human Behavior, 137,* 107417.

These examples raise important ethical questions about impression management. Is it okay to omit certain information in an online dating service in an attempt to put your best foot forward? In a job

interview, is it legitimate to act more confident about your skills than you really feel? Likewise, are you justified in acting attentive in a boring conversation out of courtesy to the other person? Is it sometimes wise to use false names and information online for your protection and security?

Situations like these suggest that managing impressions doesn't necessarily make you a liar. In fact, it is almost impossible to imagine communicating effectively without making decisions about which facets of yourself to present in one situation or another. Each of us has a repertoire of faces—a cast of characters—and part of being a competent communicator is choosing the best role for a situation. Imagine yourself in each of the following situations, and choose the most effective way you could act, considering the options:

- You offer to teach a friend a new skill, such as playing the guitar, operating a computer program, or sharpening up a tennis backhand. Your friend is making slow progress with the skill, and you find yourself growing impatient.
- You've been corresponding for several weeks with someone you met online, and the relationship is starting to turn romantic. You have a physical trait that you haven't mentioned.
- At work you face a belligerent customer. You don't believe that anyone has the right to treat you this way.

In each of these situations—and in countless others every day—you have a choice about how to act. It is an oversimplification to say that there is only one honest way to behave in each circumstance and that

every other response would be insincere and dishonest. Instead, impression management involves deciding which facets—which parts of yourself— to reveal.

4.3 Disclosing the Self

What you choose to disclose about yourself is an important component of impression management. What constitutes self-disclosure? You might argue that aside from secrets, it's impossible *not* to make yourself known to others. After all, every time you post online or speak, you're revealing your tastes, interests, desires, opinions, beliefs, or some other bit of information about yourself. In addition, Chapter 7 explains the many ways in which each of us communicates nonverbally.

4.3.1 The Nature of Self-Disclosure

If every verbal and nonverbal behavior reveals some information, what distinguishes self-disclosure? In order for a communication act to be considered self-disclosing, (1) it must contain personal information about the sender, (2) the sender must purposefully communicate this information, and (3) another person must be the target (Cozby, 1973).

Although this definition is a start, it ignores the fact that some messages intentionally directed toward others are not particularly revealing. For example, telling an acquaintance, “I don’t like clams”

is quite different from announcing, “I don’t like you.” The following are factors that further distinguish self-disclosure from other types of communication (Tilton-Weaver et al., 2014).

Honesty

It almost goes without saying that true self-disclosure must be *honest*. It’s not revealing to say, “I’ve never felt this way about anyone before” to every new date, or to preface every lie with the statement, “Let me be honest… .”

Being honest doesn’t require you to reveal everything at once. You might choose to tell a new friend that you have a complicated relationship with your parents without revealing any specifics. This information would be honest while lacking the depth you might provide as your relationship progresses (Willems et al., 2019).

Revelatory

To count as disclosing, a statement must contain personal information that wouldn’t otherwise be known. What feels deeply personal for one person may not be for another. You might feel comfortable admitting your spotty academic record or short temper to anyone who asks, whereas someone else would be embarrassed to do so. Even basic demographic information, such as age, can be extremely revealing for some people.

Availability of Information

Self-disclosing messages must contain information that the other person isn't likely to already know. For example, describing your conviction for an accident while driving under the influence might feel like an act of serious disclosure because the information concerns you, is offered intentionally, is honest and accurate, and is considered personal. However, this revelation would lose impact if you know that your conviction had been widely discussed in your social circles for several weeks.

Context of Sharing

Sometimes the self-disclosing nature of a statement comes from the setting in which it's uttered. For instance, information about family life may seem more personal when a student shares it with the class (Frisby & Sidelinger, 2013).

To summarize, **self-disclosure** (1) has the self as subject, (2) is intentional, (3) is directed at another person, (4) is honest, (5) is revelatory, (6) contains information generally unavailable from other sources, and (7) gains much of its intimate nature from the context in which it is expressed. Although many acts of communication may be self-revealing, this definition makes it clear that most everyday communication isn't particularly self-disclosing. Two friends can debate for hours which basketball player is the G.O.A.T. (greatest of all time) without disclosing much about themselves. Likewise, some coworkers make few if any self-disclosures to their colleagues. Even

partners in intimate relationships don't talk about personal matters with a high degree of frequency (Laliker & Lannutti, 2014).

4.3.2 Models of Self-Disclosure

Now that you have a basic notion of what self-disclosure is, let's take a look at two models that help us better understand how it operates in relationships.

Degrees of Self-Disclosure: The Social Penetration Model

Social psychologists Dalmas Taylor and Irwin Altman (1987) created the **social penetration model**, which describes relationships in terms of breadth and depth of self-disclosure. Figure 4.2 pictures a student's self-disclosure in one relationship as an example. The first dimension of self-disclosure in this model involves the breadth of information volunteered—the range of subjects being discussed. For example, the breadth of disclosure in your relationship with a fellow worker will expand as you begin revealing information about your life away from the job as well as on-the-job details. The second dimension of disclosure is the depth of the information being volunteered—the shift from relatively impersonal messages to more personal ones.

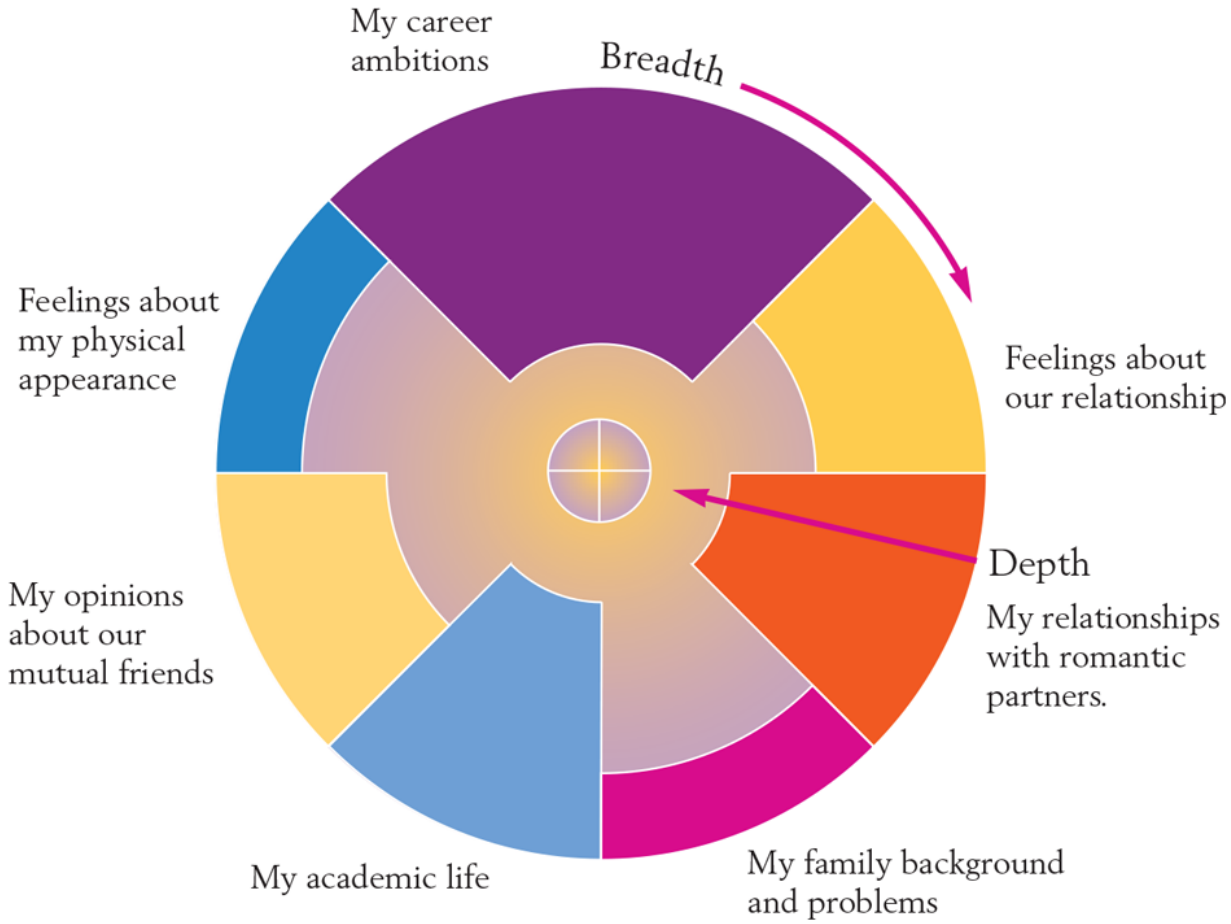


FIGURE 4.2 Sample Model of Social Penetration View larger image

Depending on the breadth and depth of information shared, a relationship can be defined as casual or intimate. In a casual relationship, the breadth may be great, but not the depth. A more intimate relationship is likely to have high depth in at least one area. The most intimate relationships are those in which disclosure is great in both breadth and depth. Altman and Taylor (1973) see the development of a relationship as a progression from the periphery of their model toward its center, a process that typically occurs over time. Each of your personal relationships probably has a different combination of breadth of subjects and depth of revelation.

One way to classify the depth of disclosure is to look at the types of information that can be revealed. *Clichés* are ritualized, stock responses to social situations—virtually the opposite of self-disclosure: “How are you doing?” “Fine.” Although hardly revealing, clichés can serve as a valuable kind of shorthand that keeps the social wheels greased.

Another kind of message involves communicating *facts*. Not all factual statements qualify as self-disclosure. To do so, a fact must fit the criteria of being intentional, significant, personal, and not otherwise known: “This isn’t my first try at college. I dropped out a year ago with terrible grades” qualifies as both a fact and self-disclosure. Disclosing personal facts like these often signals a desire to move a relationship to a deeper level of intimacy.

Opinions can be a kind of self-disclosure because they often reveal more about a person than facts alone do. Every time you offer a personal opinion (such as your political or religious beliefs, or an analysis of another person), you are giving others valuable information about yourself.

The fourth type of self-disclosure—and often the most revealing one—involves the expression of *feelings*. At first glance, feelings might appear to be the same as opinions, but there’s a big difference. “I don’t think you’re telling me about what’s on your mind” is an opinion. Notice how much more you can learn about the speaker by looking at three different feelings that could accompany this statement: “I don’t think you’re telling me what’s on your mind …

> and I’m suspicious.”

and I'm angry."

and I'm hurt."

Awareness of Self-Disclosure: The Johari Window Model

Another way to illustrate how self-disclosure operates in communication is to look at a model called the **Johari Window**, developed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham (Luft, 1969; see also Osmanogiu, 2019). ("Johari" is a mash-up of Luft's and Ingham's first names.)

Imagine a frame that contains everything there is to know about you: your likes and dislikes, your goals, your secrets, your needs—everything. This frame could be divided into information you know about yourself and things you don't know. It could also be split into things others know about you and things they don't know. Figure 4.3 reflects these divisions.

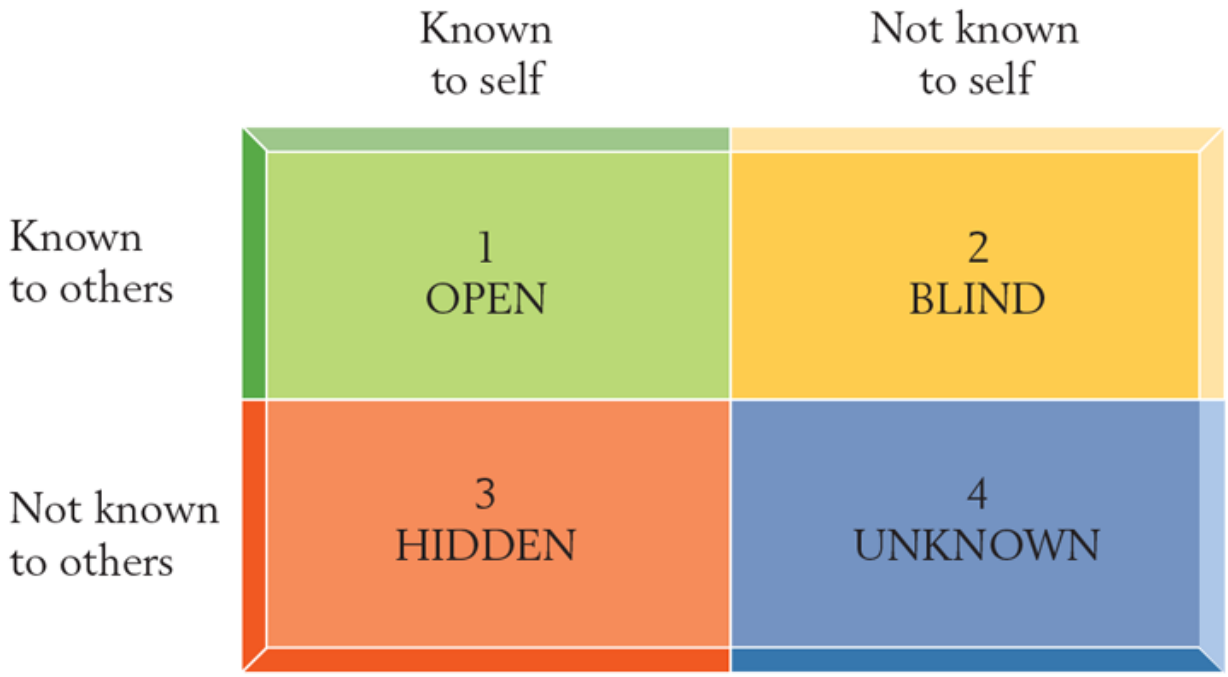


FIGURE 4.3 Johari Window View larger image

Part 1 represents the information of which both you and the other person are aware. This part is your *open area*. Part 2 represents the *blind area:* information of which you are unaware but that the other person knows. You learn about information in the blind area primarily through feedback from others. Part 3 of the Johari Window represents your *hidden area:* information that you know but aren't willing to reveal to others. Items in this hidden area become public primarily through self-disclosure, which is the focus of this section. Part 4 of the Johari Window represents information that is *unknown* to both you and others. You can deduce its existence because you are constantly discovering new things about yourself. For example, it's not unusual to discover that you have an unrecognized talent, strength, or weakness. Items move from the unknown area into the

open area when you share your insight, or into the hidden area, where it becomes a secret.

The relative size of each area in your personal Johari Windows changes from time to time according to your moods, the subject you're discussing, and your relationship with the other person. Despite these changes, a single Johari Window could represent most people's overall style of disclosure.

4.3.3 Benefits and Risks of Self-Disclosure

By now it should be clear that neither all-out disclosure nor complete privacy is desirable. On one hand, self-disclosure is a key factor in relational development, and relationships suffer when people keep important information from one another (Erwin & Pressler, 2011). On the other hand, revealing deeply personal information can threaten the stability—or even the survival—of a relationship. Communication researchers use the term **privacy management** to describe the choices people make to reveal or conceal information about themselves (Petronio, 2013; Steimel, 2021). In the following pages, we outline both the benefits and the risks of opening yourself to others.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Tattoos: Reveal or Conceal?

You just got your first tattoo. It's in a location that's hidden by clothing, so people won't know about it unless you tell them. You're eager to share the news with some people but reluctant to tell others. Why?

Researchers Meredith Foulke and Lynsey Romo interviewed tattooed young adults to learn what motivated them to verbally disclose—or not disclose—their tattoos to others. The interviewees acknowledged there's a "tattoo stigma" in some circles, so they engaged in privacy management by assessing the risks and rewards of disclosures.

Participants verbally revealed their tattoos when they perceived disclosing helped them (a) bond with others; (b) establish their identities ("My Star Wars tattoos tell you how nerdy I am"); and (c) empower themselves ("It makes you feel badass"). They concealed their tattoos when they thought it might be harmful to their professional identity or result in judgment from family and friends ("My mom would kill me—I'm going to wait a couple of years").

The study demonstrates that there are benefits and risks to disclosing personal information—and that it's always a good idea to analyze your audience before making a self-revelation.

Foulke, M., & Romo, L. (2021). An examination of how young adults manage verbal disclosure of their tattoo(s). *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, 22*, 39–46.

Benefits of Disclosure

Modern culture, at least in the United States, places high value on self-disclosure (Haugh & Carbaugh, 2015). There are a variety of personal and relational benefits to self-disclosing (Ho et al., 2018):

- *Catharsis*. Sometimes you might disclose information in an effort to "get it off your chest." Catharsis can indeed relieve the burden of pent-up emotions, whether face-to-face or online (Vilhauer, 2009)— but when it's the *only* goal of disclosure, the results of opening up may not be good.
- *Self-Clarification*. It is often possible to clarify your beliefs, opinions, thoughts, attitudes, and feelings by talking about them with another person. Gaining insight through talk occurs in many psychotherapies, but it also goes on in other relationships ranging from good friends to hairstylists and clients.
- *Self-Validation*. If you disclose information with the hope of seeking the listener's agreement ("I think I did the right thing"), you are seeking validation of your behavior—confirmation of a belief you hold about yourself. On a deeper level, this sort of self-validating disclosure seeks confirmation of important parts of your self-concept. For instance, self-validation is an important part of the coming out process through which LGBTQ people recognize their sexual orientation or gender identity and choose to disclose this knowledge in their personal, family, and social lives (Manning, 2015).

- *Reciprocity*. A well-documented conclusion from research is that one person's act of self-disclosure increases the odds that the other person will reveal personal information (Sprecher et al., 2013). There is no guarantee that revealing personal information will trigger self-disclosures by others, but your own honesty can create a climate that makes the other person feel safer and perhaps even obligated to match your level of candor ("I've been bored with our relationship lately" might get a response of "Wow, me too!"). Reciprocity applies online as well as in person. It's one of the reasons for the success of online support groups, where people often feel safe to disclose once they've read what others have shared (Wenjing et al., 2018).
- *Impression Formation*. Sometimes people reveal personal information to make themselves more attractive, and research shows that this strategy seems to work. This is especially true when disclosure is both listened to and reciprocated by a conversational partner. People who disclose reciprocally report greater attraction and conversational enjoyment (Sprecher & Treger, 2015). Consider a couple on their first date. One or both partners might share personal information to appear more sincere, interesting, sensitive, or curious about the other person. In a professional context, salespeople might share information about their personal lives to come across as more relatable and trustworthy.
- *Relationship Maintenance and Enhancement*. Research demonstrates that people who disclose personal information

are perceived as more likeable. In fact, the relationship between self-disclosure and liking works in several directions: We like people who disclose personal information to us; we reveal more about ourselves to people we like; and we tend to like others more after we have disclosed to them. For instance, blog users who self-disclose regularly on their sites report greater friendship maintenance and more satisfaction with their lives (Pang, 2018).

- *Moral Obligation*. Sometimes we disclose personal information out of a sense of moral obligation. People who are HIV-positive, for example, are often faced with the choice of whether to tell their health care providers and other partners. One study (Catona et al., 2016) found that people who are HIV-positive often see disclosing their status as a moral duty; they believe their partners have a right to know. They also believe it is their duty to raise awareness and educate others about the disease. See the Dark Side feature about self-disclosure and STDs.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Talking Frankly About STDs

STD is an acronym that strikes fear in many, and it's rarely mentioned in "polite company." But sexually transmitted diseases are a serious health issue, and talking about them candidly is an important component of responsible communication.

Here are some quick facts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/std):

- One in five people in the United States has an STI (sexually transmitted infection), with more than 25 million new infections annually.
- Three STDs in particular—chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis—have been on the rise among young people in recent years.
- STDs can result in pain, cancer, infertility, dementia, and even death.

The CDC recommends "open and honest conversation" between sexual partners as a preventive measure. Communication researchers agree, but they know it's easier said than done. One study (Horan, 2016) found that 60 percent of sexually active college students had "acted deceptively" about disclosing their sexual history, even though most said they knew better. Students in another study who measured high in privacy concerns rarely if ever talked about their sexual history with partners (Nichols, 2012). These non-disclosers said that their sexual history was "not information their partners were entitled to know."

An alternative to discussing sexual history is to ensure that both partners have been tested for STDs. HealthFinder.gov suggests phrases for approaching this delicate matter: "I really care about you and want to make sure we are both healthy";

"We can enjoy sex more if we know it's safe"; and "I've been tested for STDs—are you willing to do the same for me?"

It might be uncomfortable to start a conversation on such a personal matter, but as the CDC notes, "protecting your health is your responsibility."

Risks of Self-Disclosure

Although the benefits of disclosing are certainly important, opening up can also involve risks that make the decision to disclose a difficult and sometimes painful one (Afifi & Caughlin, 2007). The risks of self-disclosure—and related fears—fall into several categories (Greene et al., 2006; Rosenfeld, 2000):

- rejection ("Since my disclosure, they're not returning my calls")
- negative impression ("They seem to think less of me")
- decrease in relational satisfaction ("We're not getting along as well")
- loss of influence ("My opinion seems to count less")
- loss of control ("I'm worried they'll share my secret with others")
- hurting the other person ("I really injured them")

4.3.4 Guidelines for Self-Disclosure

Successful disclosure requires revealing the right types of information about yourself, with the right level of depth for a particular context and relationship. Here are guidelines to help you recognize how to express yourself in a way that's rewarding for you and for the others involved (Derlega et al., 2011; Rimé, 2016).

Is the Other Person Important to You?

There are several ways in which someone might be important. Perhaps you have an ongoing relationship deep enough so that sharing significant parts of yourself justifies keeping your present level of togetherness intact. Perhaps the person to whom you're considering disclosing is someone with whom you've previously related on a less personal level. Now you see a chance to grow closer, and disclosure may be the path toward developing that personal relationship.

Is the Risk of Disclosing Reasonable?

Most people intuitively calculate the potential benefits of disclosing against the risks of doing so (Afifi & Steuber, 2009). For instance, it might be foolhardy to share your important feelings with someone you know is likely to betray your confidences or ridicule them. On the other hand, knowing that your partner will respect the information makes the prospect of speaking out more reasonable.

This is true in both personal and professional relationships. See the At Work sidebar earlier in this chapter for a discussion of the potential risks of revealing personal information on the job.

Is the Self-Disclosure Appropriate?

Some people have trouble with what's popularly known as "TMI"—that is, sharing "too much information." In general, it's wise not to divulge personal secrets with strangers, on public social media postings (Leite et al., 2022), or on the job (Torres, 2019). Of course, it's also possible to *withhold* too much information—perhaps in a marital counseling session or at a doctor's appointment. The key is to recognize that there's a time and a place for engaging in, and refraining from, self-disclosure.

Is the Disclosure Reciprocated?

There's nothing quite as disconcerting as pouring your heart out to someone, only to discover that the other person has yet to say anything to you that is half as revealing (Poucher et al., 2022). You think to yourself, "What am I doing?" Unequal self-disclosure creates an unbalanced relationship, one with potential problems. This doesn't mean that you are obliged to match another person's revelations. What's important is that there is an appropriate balance of disclosure for maintaining each party's investment in the relationship.

Will the Effect Be Constructive?

Self-disclosure can be a vicious tool if it's not used carefully. Every person has a psychological beltline below which some topics can be extremely sensitive. It's important to consider the effects of your candor before opening up to others. Comments such as "I've always thought you were self-centered" or "Last year I made love to your best friend" may sometimes resolve old business and thus be constructive, but they also can be devastating—to the listener, to the relationship, and to your self-esteem.

In the rom-com film *Can You Keep a Secret?*, Emma (Alexandra Daddario) spills her life secrets to a stranger named Jack (Tyler Hoechlin) when she thinks their plane is about to crash. (It doesn't.) She later learns that Jack is her company's new CEO, and he now knows

way too much about her. ***Describe a time you've regretted self-disclosures you've made.*** View larger image

4.3.5 Alternatives to Self-Disclosure

Although self-disclosure plays an important role in interpersonal relationships, it isn't the only type of communication available. To understand why complete honesty isn't always an easy or ideal choice, consider some familiar dilemmas:

- You've grown increasingly annoyed with some habits of the person you live with. You fear that bringing up this topic could lead to an unpleasant conversation and maybe even damage the relationship.
- Your friend, who is headed out the door for an important job interview, says, "I know I'll never get this job! I'm really not qualified, and besides I look terrible." You agree with your friend's assessment.
- Your sub-par supervisor is undergoing a performance review, and top management has asked you for an honest evaluation. You're afraid your career will suffer if you respond truthfully.

Although honesty is desirable in principle, it often has risky and potentially unpleasant consequences. It's tempting to sidestep situations in which self-disclosure would be difficult, but examples like the ones you just read indicate that avoidance isn't always possible. Even experts agree that total honesty is not always the best relational policy (Shortsleeve, 2018). Four common alternatives to

self-disclosure are silence, lying, equivocation, and hinting. Let's take a closer look at each one.

Silence

One alternative to self-disclosure is to keep your thoughts and feelings to yourself. There are many times when keeping information to yourself can seem like the best approach, both for you and the other person. One study showed that in the workplace, withholding information is often seen as a better alternative than lying or engaging in deception (Dunleavy et al., 2010). Silence can be particularly useful when you have a potentially hurtful thought or feeling that is not being directly questioned. Why share your negative thoughts if nobody is asking what you think? Self-acknowledged talkaholic Dan Lyons offers this advice: "When possible, say nothing. Pretend words are money, and use them wisely" (Lyons, 2023).

You can get a sense of how much you rely on silence instead of disclosing by keeping a record of when you do and don't express your opinions. You're likely to find that withholding thoughts and feelings is a common approach for you.

Lying

A **lie** is a deliberate attempt to hide or misrepresent the truth. Lying to gain unfair advantage over an unknowing victim seems clearly wrong, but another kind of mistruth—the "benevolent lie"—isn't so easy to dismiss as completely unethical. **Benevolent lies** are

defined (at least by the people who tell them) as not being malicious—and perhaps they are even helpful to the person to whom they are told. You can almost certainly recall times when you have been less than truthful to avoid hurting someone you care for (for examples, see Dworkin, 2016). Not surprisingly, people consider lies to be less hurtful when they're telling them than when they're on the receiving end (Levine et al., 2022).

Whether or not they are innocent, benevolent lies are certainly common. One study found that about 90 percent of all lies fall into the benevolent "little lies" category (Serota et al., 2022). Whereas many of the lies told to best friends and friends are benevolent, many of those told to acquaintances and strangers are self-serving. Table 4.1 identifies various reasons for lying, adapted from Dunbar et al. (2016), Agosta et al. (2013), and other research cited in this section. (See Activities 3 and 4 at the end of the chapter for more discussion of lying as an alternative to self-disclosure.)

TABLE 4.1 Some Reasons for Lying

Reason	Example
Save face for others	"Don't worry—I'm sure nobody noticed that stain on your shirt."
Save face for self	"I wasn't looking at the files—I was accidentally in the wrong drawer."
Acquire resources	"Oh, please let me add this class. If I don't get in, I'll never graduate on time!"
Protect resources	"I'd like to lend you the money, but I'm short myself."

Reason	Example
Initiate interaction	“Excuse me, I’m lost. Do you live around here?”
Be socially gracious	“No, I’m not bored—tell me more about your vacation.”
Avoid conflict	“It’s not a big deal. We can do it your way. Really.”
Avoid interaction	“That sounds like fun, but I’m busy Saturday night.”
Take leave	“Oh, look what time it is! I’ve got to run!”
Present a competent image	“Sure I understand. No problem.”
Increase social desirability	“Yeah, I’ve done a fair amount of skiing.”

Not all lies are equally devastating. You may be able to cope with “misdemeanor” lying (such as the ones in Table 4.1), but “felonies” are a serious threat—often leading to the end of a relationship. The lesson here is clear: Lying about major parts of your relationship can have the gravest of consequences. If preserving a relationship is important to you, then honesty—at least about important matters—really does appear to be the best policy. Section 10.3.3 will have more to say about repairing relationships that have been damaged by lies. (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter for skill building about benevolent lies.)

Equivocation

There are other alternatives to blatant truth-telling. When faced with difficult disclosure choices, communicators can—and often do—use **equivocation**: statements that are not literally false but cleverly avoid an unpleasant truth (Bello, 2016).

The value of equivocation becomes clear when you consider the alternatives. Consider the dilemma of what to say when you've been given an unwanted present—an ugly painting, for example—and the giver asks what you think of it. How can you respond? On one hand, you need to choose between telling the truth and lying. At the same time, you have a choice of whether to make your response clear or vague. Figure 4.4 displays these choices.

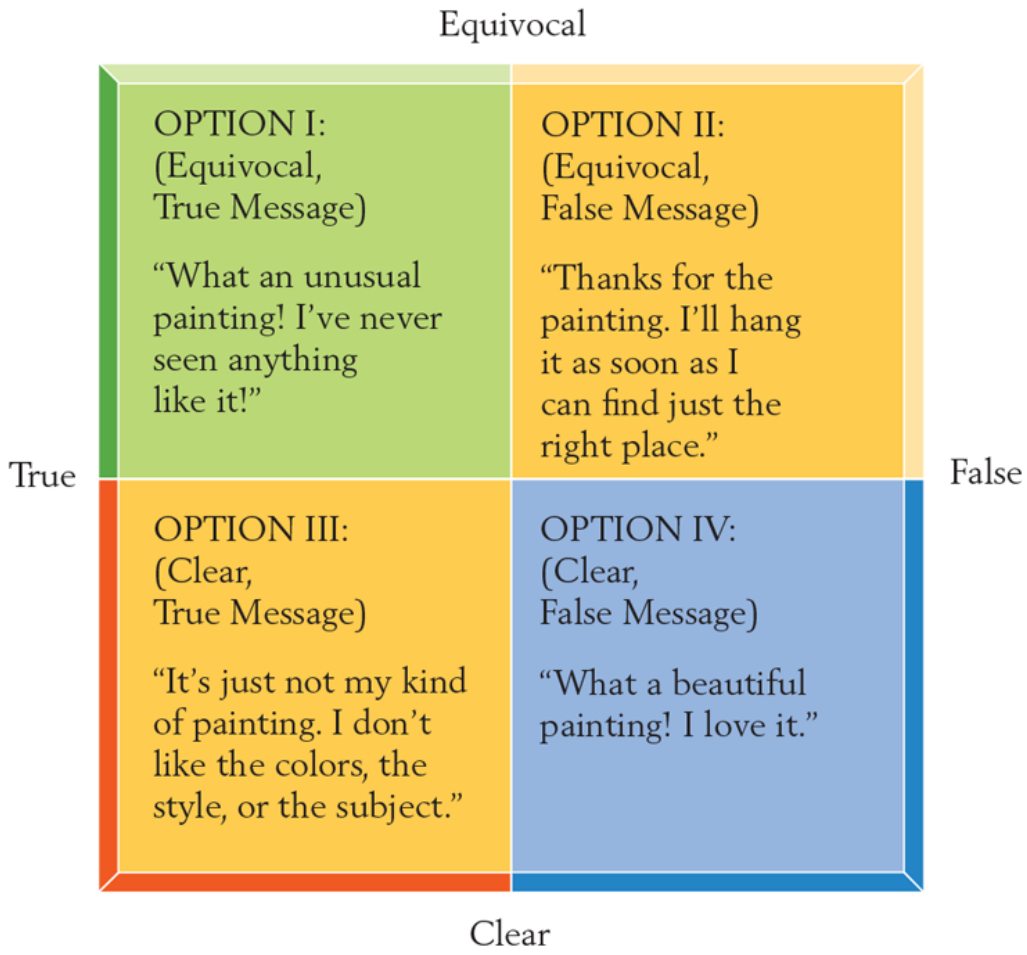


FIGURE 4.4 Dimensions of Truthfulness and Equivocation View larger image

The underlying point of equivocal messages is usually understood by their recipients. One study (Bello & Edwards, 2005) explored how receivers interpreted equivocal statements, such as a friend calling your speech "interesting" instead of saying, "You messed up." Besides regarding the equivocal statements as more polite, the recipients had no trouble discerning the intended meaning—that the speech was poor, to use our example.

Given the advantages of equivocation, it's not surprising that most people usually will choose to equivocate rather than tell a lie. In a

series of experiments, subjects chose between telling a face-saving lie, the truth, and equivocating (Bavelas et al., 1990). Only 6 percent chose the lie, and between 3 percent and 4 percent chose the hurtful truth. By contrast, over 90 percent chose the equivocal response. People may say they prefer truth-telling to equivocating, but given the choice, they often finesse the truth.

Some forms of equivocation rely on telling partial truths (Rogers et al., 2017). Imagine that you had promised to be home right after work but instead went out for drinks with coworkers. Upon arriving home late, you might justify your tardiness by saying, "One of my work friends needed to talk about a personal problem." Even if your happy hour conversation included such a discussion, this technically honest statement is clearly an act of deception.

Communicators who hedge the truth view this strategy as less ethically suspect than more blatant forms of deception. As one researcher put it (Gino, 2016), telling partial truth "allows them to maintain an image of themselves as honest and trustworthy individuals." Technically speaking, they reason, no lie was told. But when those on the receiving end of such statements discover the full story, they are just as offended as if they had been the target of an outright falsehood (McGregor, 2017).

Hinting

Hints are more direct than equivocal statements. Whereas an equivocal message isn't necessarily aimed at changing another's behavior, a hint seeks to get the desired response from the other

person. Some hints are designed to save the receiver from embarrassment:

Direct Statement	Face-Saving Hint
You have already eaten a lot; why don't you skip dessert?	These desserts are really overpriced.
I'm too busy to keep talking to you.	I know you're busy; I'd better let you go.

Other hints are less concerned with protecting the receiver than with saving the sender from embarrassment:

Direct Statement	Face-Saving Hint
Please don't vape near me.	I'm not sure vaping is permitted here.
Please come out to lunch with me.	It's almost time for lunch. Have you ever eaten at that new restaurant around the corner?

The success of a hint depends on the other person's ability to pick up the unexpressed message. Your subtle remarks might go right over the head of an insensitive receiver, or one who chooses not to respond to them. One study found that when closeted lesbians and gay men made hints about needing social support, their indirect

messages were often ignored, and they didn't get the help they needed (Williams et al., 2016). If you find that your hints aren't getting through, you have the choice to be more direct or withdraw without risk.

The Ethics of Evasion

It's easy to see why people often choose hints, equivocations, and benevolent lies instead of self-disclosure. These strategies provide a way to manage difficult situations that is easier than the alternatives for both the speaker and the receiver of the message. In this sense, successful liars, equivocators, and hinters can be said to possess a certain kind of communicative competence. On the other hand, there *are* times when honesty is the right approach, even if it's painful. At times like these, evaders could be viewed as lacking either the competence or the integrity to handle a situation effectively.

Are hints, benevolent lies, and equivocations ethical alternatives to self-disclosure? Some of the examples in these pages suggest that the answer is a qualified "yes." You might sometimes lie to protect another person. This form of deception has been referred to as "prosocial lying" (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). Interestingly, people who are more compassionate are more prone to tell prosocial lies; their compassion leads them to avoid telling hurtful truths (Lupoli et al., 2017).

Ethicist Sissela Bok (1999) offers some circumstances where deception may be justified: doing good, avoiding harm, and protecting a larger truth. One example is when a patient asks, "How

am I doing?" If a nurse perceives that telling the truth could be harmful, it would violate the obligation to "do good and avoid harm," and honesty would be less important than caring (Hart, 2019). Perhaps the right questions to ask, then, are whether an indirect message is truly in the interests of the receiver and whether this sort of evasion is the only effective way to behave. Bok suggests another way to check the justifiability of a lie: Imagine how others would respond if they knew what you were really thinking or feeling. Would they accept your reasons for not disclosing? (See Activity 4 at the end of the chapter for an ethical challenge about alternatives to self-disclosure.)

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 4.1 **Describe how the self-concept is subjective and is shaped by, and consequently affects, communication with others.**

The self-concept is a relatively stable set of perceptions individuals hold about themselves. It begins to develop soon after birth, being shaped by the appraisals of significant others and by social comparisons with reference groups. The self-concept is subjective and can vary substantially from the way a person is perceived by others. Although the self may evolve over time, the self-concept resists change.

A self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when a person's expectations of an event and subsequent behavior influence the event's outcome. One type of prophecy consists of predictions by others, whereas another category is self-imposed.

Q: Identify your own self-concept and identify the messages from others that have shaped it.

Q: Describe how self-fulfilling prophecies (both self-imposed and from others) affect the ways you communicate.

Objective 4.2 **Explain how you manage impressions in person and online to enhance your presenting image.**

Impression management consists of an individual's strategic communication designed to influence others' perceptions. It aims at presenting one or more faces to others, which may be different from private, spontaneous behavior that occurs outside of others' presence. Communicating through mediated channels can enhance a person's ability to manage impressions. Because each person has a variety of faces to reveal or not, choosing which one to present is a central concern of competent communicators.

Q: Describe the various identities you attempt to present to others and the strategies you use (in person and via mediated channels) to construct them.

Objective 4.3 **Identify an optimal level of self-disclosure and non-disclosure in effective relationships.**

Self-disclosure consists of honest, revealing messages about the self that are intentionally directed toward others. Disclosing communication contains information that is generally unavailable via other sources. The percentage of messages that are truly self-disclosing is relatively low. A number of factors govern whether a communicator will be judged as being a high- or low-level discloser.

Two models for describing self-disclosure are the social penetration model and the Johari Window model. The social

penetration model describes two dimensions of self-disclosure: breadth and depth. The Johari Window illustrates the amount of information that an individual reveals to others, hides, is blind to, and is unaware of.

Communicators disclose personal information for a variety of reasons. There also are several reasons to choose not to self-disclose, some of which serve primarily the interests of the non-discloser, and others of which are intended to benefit the target. When deciding whether to disclose, communicators should consider a variety of factors detailed in the chapter.

Four alternatives to revealing self-disclosures are silence, lies (both benevolent and self-serving), equivocations, and hints. These may be ethical alternatives to self-disclosure; however, whether they are or not depends on the speaker's motives and the effects of the deception.

Q: Use the social penetration model and Johari Window model to represent the level of disclosure involving an important topic in one of your important relationships.

Q: Compose responses to a situation that reflect varying degrees of candor and equivocation. Choose the response that seems most appropriate and effective for the situation.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Reflection:** Identify three people whose appraisals of you have shaped your self-concept (Section 4.1.1). If possible, describe messages from people who have had plenty of input into how you see yourself, and also from those whose singular comments left an imprint on you. Describe the ongoing impact those messages and ones like them have had on your communication with others.
2. **Self-Appraisal**: After reviewing Section 4.2, identify five to ten ways in which you've attempted to manage impressions about yourself in the past week. They might involve how you treated the barista ("I'm a polite customer"), the way you talked to a friend ("I'm fun to be around"), or when you asked a question in class ("I'm a conscientious student"). Now appraise how well your attempts at impression management seem to have succeeded in each of those roles.
3. **Build Your Skill:** Table 4.1 (in Section 4.3.5) describes a variety of reasons for lying. Without looking at the examples in that table, see if you can create types of "benevolent lies" you might tell for the following reasons:
    a. To save face for others.

b. To save face for yourself.
c. To be socially gracious.
d. To avoid conflict.
e. To present a competent image.

4. **Ethical Challenge:** How would you rate each of the lies you described in Activity 3 on a 1–5 scale from "Absolutely unethical" to "Ethically justifiable?" Review this chapter's section on "The Ethics of Evasion" and create a personal statement about when you would and wouldn't use the alternatives to self-disclosure described in Section 4.3.5.

Assessing Your Communication: Online and Offline Self-Disclosure (Personal Practice)

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

- Benevolent lies
- equivocation
- face
- facework
- impression management
- Johari Window
- lie
- perceived self
- presenting self
- privacy management
- reference groups
- reflected appraisal
- self-concept
- self-disclosure
- Self-esteem
- self-fulfilling prophecy
- significant other

social comparison

social penetration model

CHAPTER 4 Flashcards

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

5
Perceiving Others

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **5.1** Understand the four steps in the perception process.
- **5.2** Identify the variety of influences on interpersonal perception.
- **5.3** Recognize how common tendencies in perception shape interpersonal communication.
- **5.4** Use perception checking and adjust attitudes to enhance empathy with communication

partners.

INTERNATIONAL STATESMAN NELSON MANDELA was fond of saying, "Where you stand depends on where you sit." He knew that the stances he took on issues were framed by his unique vantage point in life. Likewise, who you are and how you were raised are unique to you, which means that *no one perceives the world exactly the way you do*. This essential principle significantly affects interpersonal relations, as communicators attempt to share meaning from perspectives that are often quite different.

Just like the cubes in Figure 5.1, every interpersonal situation can be seen from multiple points of view. Take a minute to study that figure. How many ways can you discover to view this image? If you only see one or two, keep looking; Figure 5.2 shows four ways. The point of this exercise is to recognize that making quick and accurate sense of even simple perspective drawings is a difficult task. With that in mind, you can begin to understand the challenge involved in imagining the perspectives of other human beings, who are far more complex and multidimensional.

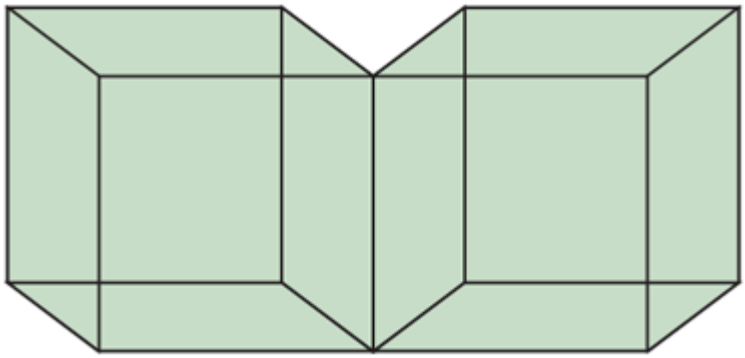


FIGURE 5.1 How Many Different Ways Can You View Two Cubes? View larger image

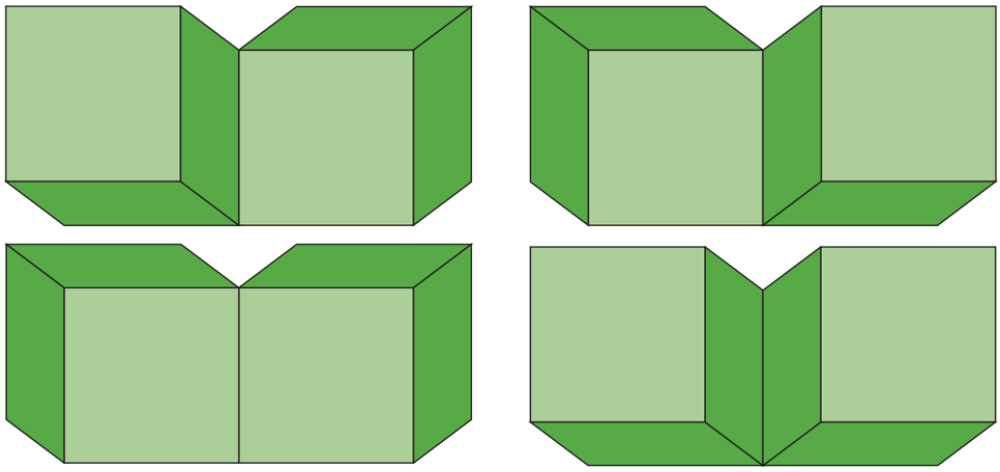


FIGURE 5.2 Four Ways of Viewing Figure 5.1. View larger image

This chapter provides tools for communicating in the face of perceptual differences. The starting point is describing steps in the perception process, followed by explaining some of the many reasons the world appears so different to each of us. After examining the perceptual factors that make understanding so difficult,

the chapter concludes with methods for synchronizing perceptions.

5.1 The Perception Process

Leonardo da Vinci believed that "all our knowledge has its origin in our perceptions." How does this knowledge filtered through perception affect communication? You can better understand by examining how people attach meaning to their experiences in four steps: selection, organization, interpretation, and negotiation.

5.1.1 Selection

Because people are exposed to more stimuli than they can possibly manage, the first step in perception is **selection**, or determining which stimuli receive attention. Several factors contribute to noticing some messages while ignoring others (Coon, 2009):

- *Intensity*. Something that is louder, larger, or brighter stands out. Someone who laughs or talks loudly at a party attracts more attention (not always favorable) than do quieter guests.
- *Repetition*. Repetitious stimuli can also attract attention. Just think of a quiet but steadily dripping faucet.
- *Contrast or change*. Unchanging people or things are less noticeable. For example, you may appreciate your significant others more when they leave.

Later in this chapter, we look at a variety of other factors—physiological, psychological, social, and cultural—that lead us to pay attention to certain people and events.

5.1.2 Organization

After selecting information from the environment, the next stage is **organization**, or arranging it in some meaningful way (out of many possibilities) to help make sense of the world. People organize using *perceptual schema*, or cognitive frameworks (Young, 2021). Various

types of schema make it possible to classify others, including the following (Freeman & Ambady, 2011):

- *Physical* (e.g., beautiful or plain, heavy or thin, young or old)
- *Role-based* (e.g., student, attorney, spouse)
- *Interaction-based* (e.g., friendly, helpful, aloof, sarcastic)
- *Psychological* (e.g., confident, insecure, happy)

Once you've selected an organizing scheme to classify others, it's easy to make generalizations about members of the groups who fit those categories. For example, if you are especially aware of a person's attractiveness, you might be alert to the differences in the way beautiful and plain people are treated (more on this in Chapter 7). If religion plays an important part in your life, you might think of members of your faith differently than you do others. It's easy to organize observations into generalizations ("Women tend to … "; "Teachers usually … "; "Nervous people often … … "). There's nothing wrong with generalizations about groups as long as they are accurate. But overgeneralizations (typically involving descriptors such as "always" and "never") can lead to problems of stereotyping, which you'll read about in a few pages.

Besides generalizing, communicators can organize specific exchanges in different ways, and these organizational schemes can have a powerful effect on relationships. Communication theorists use the term **punctuation** to describe the determination of causes and effects in a series of interactions (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Imagine a running quarrel between two friends or lovers. The order in which

each partner punctuates this cycle affects how the dispute looks. Person A begins by blaming the other: "I withdraw because you're so demanding." Person B organizes the situation differently: "I demand so much because you're withdrawing." It's easy to see how these kinds of demand–withdraw arguments are associated with depression (Holley et al., 2018). Once the cycle gets rolling, determining which accusation is accurate is impossible, as Figure 5.3 indicates. The answer depends on how the sequence is punctuated.

FIGURE 5.3 The Way a Communication Sequence Is Punctuated Affects Its Perceived Meaning. Which comes first, the demanding or the withdrawing? View larger image

Anyone who has seen two children argue about "who started it" can understand that haggling over causes and effects isn't likely to solve a conflict. In fact, assigning blame will probably make matters worse (Razzetti, 2018). Rather than argue about whose punctuation of an

event is correct, it's more productive to recognize that a dispute can look different to each person and then move on to the more important question of "What can we do to make things better?"

5.1.3 Interpretation

After selecting and organizing perceptions, you need to interpret them in a way that makes some sort of sense. **Interpretation**—attaching meaning to sense data—plays a role in virtually every interpersonal act. Is the person who smiles at you across a crowded room interested in romance or simply being polite? Is a friend's kidding a sign of affection or irritation? Should you take an invitation to "drop by any time" literally or not?

Several factors cause us to interpret a person's behavior in one way or another. For example:

- *Relational satisfaction.* A behavior that seems positive when you are happy with a partner might seem completely different when the relationship isn't satisfying (Luo et al., 2010). Couples in unsatisfying relationships are more likely than satisfied partners to blame one another when things go wrong (Diamond & Hicks, 2012). And the opposite also holds true: Partners in a satisfying relationship are likely to view each other more benevolently than accurately (Segrin et al., 2009).
- *Personal experience.* If you've been taken advantage of by landlords in the past, you might be skeptical about

reclaiming your cleaning deposit.

- *Personality*. A study found that people with cold (relative to warm) dispositions have difficulty interpreting and labeling the emotions of others (Moeller et al., 2012). The researchers suggest that this deficiency can contribute to poorer social relationships for those with cold personalities.
- *Assumptions about human behavior*. Do you assume people are lazy and dislike work, or do you believe people generally exercise self-direction and self-control? Imagine the differences in a boss who assumes workers fit the first description versus the second (Sager, 2008).
- *Online vs. in-person communication:* Consistent with the notion of hyperpersonal communication (Section 2.3.1), people perceive others' self-revelations as more personal and intimate when they read them online than when they hear them in person (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). It's easy to "read between the lines" and fill in gaps when interpreting online comments.

Note that the selection, organization, and interpretation phases of perception can occur in differing sequences. For example, a parent's or babysitter's past interpretations (such as "Alex is a troublemaker") can influence future selections (the child's behavior becomes especially noticeable) and the organization of events (when there's a fight, the assumption is that Alex started it). As with all communication, perception is an ongoing process whose beginnings and endings are hard to pin down.

"The same thing can happen but you see it in a different way," says Detective Danner (Tiffany Haddish) as she tries to solve a whodunnit in the TV series *The Afterparty*. The suspects all select, organize, and interpret recollections from their own unique perspectives. ***Describe a time when you and others told very different versions of the same event. How did you determine what "really" happened?*** View larger image

5.1.4 Negotiation

In Chapter 1 you read that meaning is created both *in* and *among* people. So far this discussion has focused on the inner components of perception—selection, organization, and interpretation—that take place in each person's mind. Now we need to examine the part of our sense-making that occurs *among* people. **Negotiation** is the process by which communicators influence each other's perceptions.

Negotiation can operate in subtle ways. For example, it's rare to draw a conclusion about something or someone without comparing notes

with others. Imagine you think a person you just met is attractive, and you mention this impression to friends. If you hear negative appraisals from them ("I don't find that person attractive"), you might shift your initial perception—maybe not radically, but at least a bit. In one study that examined this process, college students rated the attractiveness of models in a series of photos (Yang & Lee, 2014). Those who were able to see others' evaluations of the same photos slowly shifted their ratings to match the consensus. This finding suggests that beauty isn't just in the eye of the (individual) beholder—it's in the eyes of the (negotiating) beholders.

Consider times when you've asked a friend, "Is it just me, or did that comment seem rude?" If your friend responds, "No, it wasn't just you—I felt the same way," then your perception is confirmed and probably solidified. But if your friend says, "No, I didn't think it was rude at all—I'm glad it was said," it might lead you to adjust your conclusion about the comment and the speaker. In either case, "Is it just me?" is about negotiating your perception. The same is true of "Give me your perspective" and "Tell me how you see this." Comparing notes with others is a crucial part of making sense of the world. Toward that end, perception isn't just a personal process—it's also an interpersonal one.

5.2 Influences on Perception

While we believe we perceive the world objectively as it is, a variety of factors, both conscious and unconscious, influence how people select, organize, interpret, and negotiate data about others (Proffitt & Baer, 2020). These include available information as well as physiological, social, and cultural factors.

5.2.1 Access to Information

You can only make sense of what you know, and nobody knows everything about even the closest people in their lives. When new information becomes available, perceptions of others change. If you see your instructors only when they're teaching in the classroom, your conclusions about them will be based solely on their behaviors in that role. You might change your perception if you observe them in the roles of rush-hour driver, concertgoer, or grocery shopper.

You can also gain access to new information about others when their roles overlap. Consider how that might occur at an office party. A person's "office" and "party" roles are usually quite different—so at an offsite work celebration, you may see behaviors you hadn't expected. Similarly, when your sweetheart takes you home to meet the family, you might get to watch your partner playing a "spoiled

son" or "princess daughter" role. If you've ever said, "I saw a whole new side of you tonight," chances are it's because you gained access to information you didn't have before.

Social media can provide information that affects perceptions. Your online postings can be seen by selected friends and followers, but in some cases that may include family members, work colleagues, teachers, employers, or even total strangers. Scholars refer to this as *context collapse*, in which online-audience boundary lines get blurred (Darr & Doss, 2022). Even if you use filters and blocks, your social media postings will likely reach a wider audience than you intended. That's why job hunters are encouraged to clean up their online profiles and be careful to manage the impressions they might make (Wong & Reshef, 2018). It's always wise to monitor information you offer about yourself—both online and off.

Watch and Discuss 5.1: "All That We Share"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Consider how we *organize* and *interpret* information about others based on the "box" we see them in.
2. Discuss how *access to information* and new "boxes" can help break down walls and build relationships.

5.2.2 Physiological Influences

Sometimes differing perspectives come from the physical environment and the ways one person's body differs from others'.

The Senses

The differences in how each of us sees, hears, tastes, touches, and smells stimuli can affect interpersonal relationships (Croy et al., 2013). Consider a few examples arising from physiological differences:

> "Turn down that music! It's giving me a headache."
>
> "It's not too loud. If I turn it down, it will be impossible to hear it."
>
> "It's freezing in here."
>
> "Are you kidding? We'll suffocate if you turn up the heat!"
>
> "Why don't you pass that truck? The highway is clear for half a mile."
>
> "I can't see that far, and I'm not going to get us killed."

Age

Views of the world change over a lifetime. Age alters not just your body but your perspectives. Consider, for instance, how you've viewed your parents through the years. When you were a child, you

may have thought they were all-knowing and flawless. As a teen, you might have viewed them as old-fashioned and mean. As you age, your view of them may change yet again, and you may come to regard them as knowledgeable and perhaps even wise. Although your parents have probably changed over time, it's likely that your *perception* of them has changed far more than they have (Chopik et al., 2018). A tongue-in-cheek observation attributed to Mark Twain puts it this way: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."

Health and Fatigue

Recall the last time you were sick. Health can have a strong impact on how you perceive and relate to others. Romance doesn't sound appealing when you have a headache, and a night on the town with friends is more enjoyable when your muscles aren't aching. It's good to realize that someone else may be behaving differently because of illness. In the same way, it's important to let others know when you feel ill so they can give you the understanding you need.

Likewise, fatigue can affect relationships. People who are sleep deprived, for example, perceive emotions on the faces of others differently than they would otherwise (Beattie, 2018). One study found that when married couples don't sleep well, they have more negative perceptions of each other the following day, leading to more interpersonal discord (Seidman, 2011). A good night's sleep is an

invaluable asset for managing interpersonal conflict (Gordon & Chen, 2014).

Biological Cycles

Are you a “morning person” or a “night person”? Everyone has a daily cycle in which all sorts of changes constantly occur, including variations in body temperature, sexual drive, alertness, and tolerance to stress (Koukkari & Sothern, 2006) and to pain (Jankowski, 2013). These cycles can affect the way people relate to each other. For example, you are probably better off avoiding prickly topics in the morning with someone who is not at their best then.

Hunger

Your own experience probably confirms that having overeaten (and getting tired) or being hungry (and getting “hangry”) affects how you interact with others (Swami et al., 2022). For example, teenagers who reported that their family did not get enough food to eat were almost three times as likely to have been suspended from school, almost twice as likely to have difficulty getting along with others, and four times as likely to have no friends (Alaimo et al., 2001). Although the exact nature of the causes and effects in this study is hard to pin down, one thing is clear: Hunger can affect perception and communication.

In the film *The King of Staten Island*, Scott Carlin (Pete Davidson) lacks the focus to finish high school, succeed as a tattoo artist, or publicly commit to his girlfriend. Crohn's disease and ADHD present health and neurobehavioral challenges that affect his perception and direction. ***How have physiological influences shaped your perspective and communication?*** View larger image

Neurobehavioral Challenges

Some differences in perception are rooted in neurology. Bipolar and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are two of many such neurobehavioral conditions. Bipolar disorder can create mood swings that dramatically alter perceptions of events, friends, family members, and social support (Doherty & MacGeorge, 2013). Males

with ADHD tend to struggle with impulsivity, while females are more likely to experience anxiety and depression (Weissenberger et al., 2020). One writer described how ADHD wreaked havoc on his interpersonal communication:

> When I was undiagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and I'd gotten into arguments with romantic partners, I regularly found myself unable to form a coherent sentence. I *wanted* to say so many things, but trying to transfer those thoughts from my head to my mouth left me feeling like I'd eaten a too-large spoonful of mashed potatoes and was now being asked to sing the national anthem live on television. My body would tense with anxiety. My mind would be a chaotic whirlwind of TV static, and when I opened my mouth, all that came out was a long, irritating *beep* letting everyone know the channel was not accessible. (Harvey, 2022)

Between 15 and 20 percent of the world is considered neurodivergent, a group that also includes people with dyslexia and autism (Montvelisky, 2021). These conditions can have an impact on interpersonal perception and communication, requiring patience and understanding by all parties involved (Taylor, 2022).

5.2.3 Social Influences

Within a society, personal point of view plays a strong role in shaping perceptions. Social scientists have developed **standpoint theory** to describe how a person's position in a society shapes their perspective (Hall, 2020). Standpoint theory is most often applied to the difference between the perspectives of privileged social groups and people who have less power (Kinefuchi & Orbe, 2008), including the perspectives of women (Buzzanell et al., 2017). Those with privilege have difficulty understanding how the world might look to those who

have been treated badly because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic class. Being marginalized can make the world seem like a very different place.

We look now at how some specific types of societal roles affect an individual's perception.

Sex and Gender Roles

As mentioned in Section 3.3.2, a person's sex is typically assigned on the basis of biology (primarily male and female), while **gender** is a social, symbolic construction involving dimensions of masculinity and femininity (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2017). Both sex and gender can influence the perception process.

A large body of research shows that men and women perceive the world differently, for reasons ranging from genes to neurology to hormones to socialization (Rippon, 2019; Schroeder, 2010). One study found that women are better than men at reading emotion in facial expressions, which is consistent with research showing that women are generally more perceptive about interpreting others' nonverbal cues (Rennels & Cummings, 2013; see also Hall & Andrzejewski, 2017). However, the authors noted these differences weren't in place at infancy, and it's hard to know whether nature or nurture was responsible for the development of this skill over time.

Gender role stereotypes can influence perception. In one experiment (Matthews, 2016), college debate judges were asked to assess the aggressiveness of participants in a fictional debate round. Even

though all the debaters used similar language, the judges perceived the women as significantly more aggressive than the men. In a different study (Kingsbury & Coplan, 2016), participants perceived ambiguous text messages as more negative when the hypothetical sender was identified as a woman—particularly if the recipient was a man. Finally, readers of online health advice viewed the source as more credible if it came from a man than a women (Embacher et al., 2018). These findings suggest that communicators frequently see the world through a gendered lens, often perceiving and treating women unfairly, whether they mean to or not.

One way to appreciate the impact of gender roles on perception is to consider the experiences of transgender individuals. Many report seeing the world differently after transitioning (Alter, 2016). "I'm still trying to figure out all of the different secret codes that guys use to talk to each other and to make friendships," says one trans man. "I don't know what that punch on the arm meant."

@WORK

Sexual Harassment and Perception

What does a hand on the shoulder mean when making a workplace request? What if it lasts for more than a few seconds? Or how about the statement, "You need to do more around here—*much* more"? Every student of communication knows that messages have no meaning until people give them meaning—and that's largely a matter of perception.

Understanding interpersonal perception is thus critical to addressing the challenging issue of sexual harassment.

Research indicates that about half of U.S. women have experienced harassment at their workplace (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). Although many examples of this behavior are clear-cut, differing perceptions explain many other incidents. For example, women are more likely than men to perceive behaviors as sexual harassment, and people with sexist attitudes tend to see less evidence of sexual harassment around them (Bitton & Shaul, 2013). Cultural background also shapes perceptions of harassment (Toker, 2016; Worke et al., 2021). People from cultures with high power distance (see Chapter 3) are less likely to perceive harassment from higher-ups than are those from places with low power distance.

Findings like these help explain why some people find sexual harassment where others see nothing offensive. That's where clear communication comes in: When members of an organization share their own perceptions and better understand those of others, you can expect fewer misunderstandings and greater job satisfaction. The perception-checking skills described in this chapter can be used to help the cause.

Occupational Roles

The kind of work people do also influences their view of the world. Imagine five people taking a walk through a park. One, a botanist, is fascinated by the variety of trees and plants. Another, a zoologist, is

on the lookout for interesting animals. The third, a meteorologist, keeps an eye on the sky, noticing changes in the weather. The fourth, a psychologist, is unaware of the goings-on of nature, concentrating instead on the interaction among the people in the park. The fifth, a pickpocket, quickly takes advantage of the others' absorption to collect their wallets. There are two lessons in this little story: The first, of course, is to watch your wallet carefully. The second is that occupational roles frequently influence perceptions.

An early social science experiment dramatically illustrated how occupational roles shape perception. Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo (1971, 2007) recruited a group of well-educated, middle-class young men. He randomly chose 11 to serve as "guards" in a mock prison set up in the basement of Stanford's psychology building. He issued the guards uniforms, handcuffs, whistles, and billy clubs. The remaining 10 participants became "prisoners" and were placed in rooms with metal bars, bucket toilets, and cots.

Zimbardo let the guards establish their own rules for the experiment: no talking during meals and rest periods and after lights out. They took head counts at 2:30 a.m. Troublemakers received short rations. Faced with these conditions, the prisoners began to resist. Some barricaded their doors with beds. Others went on hunger strikes. Several ripped off their identifying number tags. The guards reacted to the rebellion by clamping down hard on protesters. Some turned sadistic, physically and verbally abusing the prisoners. Critics have challenged the study's validity (Gray, 2013), but there's little doubt that the roles guards and prisoners took on led them to perceive, and then treat, each other very differently.

The film *The Stanford Prison Experiment* dramatizes a study by Dr. Philip Zimbardo described in this section. The experiment shows how adopting occupational roles can influence perception and behavior. ***How do your social roles shape your perceptions of others?*** View larger image

You can probably think of ways in which jobs you've held have affected how you view others. If you've been in customer service, you're probably more patient and understanding with those in similar positions (although you could also be a bit more critical). And if you've ever been promoted to manager at your workplace, you know it typically changes your perceptions of, and behavior toward, coworkers who are now under your supervision (Grobman, 2022).

Relational Roles

Think back to the "Who am I?" list you made in Chapter 4. It's likely that your list included roles you play in relation to others: You may be a daughter, roommate, spouse, friend, and so on. Roles like these don't just define who you are—they also affect your perception.

Take, for example, the role of parent. As most new parents will attest, having a child alters the way they see the world. They might perceive their crying baby as a helpless soul in need of comfort, whereas nearby strangers have a less charitable appraisal. As the child grows, parents often pay more attention to the messages in the child's environment. One father we know said he never noticed how much football fans curse and swear until he took his 6-year-old to a game with him. In other words, his role as father affected what he paid attention to and how he interpreted it.

The roles involved in romantic love can also dramatically affect perception. These roles have many labels: partner, spouse, significant other, and so on. At times your affinity may bias the way you perceive the object of your affection. You may see your sweetheart as more attractive than other people do and as more attractive than your previous partners, regardless of whether that's objectively accurate (Swami & Allum, 2012). You may also overlook some faults that others notice (Wilde & Dozois, 2021). Your romantic role can also change the way you view others. Two separate studies (Cole et al., 2016; Gonzaga et al., 2008) found that when people are in love, they view other romantic candidates as less attractive than

they otherwise would (a research team referred to this as “perceptual downgrading”).

Perhaps the most telltale sign of the effect of “love goggles” is when they come off. Many people have experienced breaking up with a romantic partner and wondering later, “What did I ever see in that person?” The answer—at least in part—is that you saw what your relational role led you to see. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for a reflection on how your occupational and relational roles affect your perception.)

5.2.4 Cultural Influences

Culture influences selection, organization, interpretation, and negotiation, and it exerts a powerful influence on the way we view others' communication (Harada et al., 2020). Even beliefs about the very value of talk differ from one culture to another (Dailey et al., 2005). Western cultures tend to view talk as desirable and use it for social purposes as well as to perform tasks. Silence has a negative value in these cultures. It is likely to be interpreted as lack of interest, unwillingness to communicate, hostility, anxiety, shyness, or a sign of interpersonal incompatibility. Westerners are generally uncomfortable with silence, which they often find embarrassing and awkward.

On the other hand, Asian cultures tend to perceive talk quite differently (Kim, 2002). Silence is valued, as Taoist sayings indicate: "In much talk there is great weariness," or "One who speaks does not know; one who knows does not speak." Unlike Westerners, Japanese and Chinese communicators believe that remaining quiet is the proper state when there is nothing to be said. To Asians, a talkative person is often considered a show-off or a fake.

These different views of speech and silence can lead to communication problems when people from different cultures meet. Communicators may view each other with disapproval and mistrust. Only when they recognize cultural differences in behavior can they adapt—understanding, respecting, and perhaps even integrating their differences.

Native American (NA) healers, for example, view the body as a complex whole. In contrast, non-NA physicians tend to specialize, seeing the body as a series of discrete parts to be treated separately. Spirituality plays an essential role in wellness for Native Americans. Modern NA health practices integrate ancient communication rituals, notably healing circles, where participants share personal narratives about sickness and recovery, aided by a traditional talking stick that regulates turn-taking in conversation. Bringing community into the healing process produces better patient outcomes: "While the family doctor may spend ten or fifteen minutes extracting diagnostic data from the patient, healing circles provide the opportunity to share the emotional aspects of illness and healing" (Vemireddy, 2020).

Culture plays an important role in the ability to understand the perspectives of others (Wang et al., 2018). People raised in individualistic cultures, which value independence, are often less adept at perspective-taking than those from collectivistic cultures, which value interdependence. In one study, players from China and the U.S. were paired together in a communication game that required the participants to take on the perspective of their partners (Wu & Keysar, 2007). In all measures, the Chinese participants had greater success in perspective-taking than did their U.S. counterparts. This isn't to suggest that one cultural orientation is better than the other; it only shows that culture shapes the way we perceive, understand, and empathize with others.

Co-cultural factors affect perception as well. In studies using photos of children of various races, participants perceived Black children as

being significantly older than their actual ages (Goff et al., 2014). The same was not true of perceptions of white or Latinx children. Participants also regarded Black children as being more responsible for their actions than children of other races. The researchers maintain that this perception affects the treatment of Black children in U.S. culture. We'll have more to say about the negative effects of stereotyping later in this chapter.

5.3 Common Tendencies in Perception

By now it's obvious that many factors affect the way we interpret the world. Social scientists use the term **attribution** to describe the process of attaching meaning to behavior (LaBelle & Martin, 2014; Rittenour & Kellas, 2015). People attribute meaning to both their own actions and the actions of others, but often use different yardsticks. Research has uncovered several perceptual tendencies that may lead to inaccurate attributions.

5.3.1 We Make Snap Judgments

Since the dawn of time, humans have needed to make quick decisions about whether strangers are likely to be dangerous. This ability can be a survival skill (Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2013). But in many cases, judging others without enough knowledge or information can be problematic. With potentially lethal consequences, gun holders may fire at innocent people after making inaccurate snap decisions. On a more personal level, most of us have felt badly after others made unfavorable snap judgments about us. If you've ever been written off in the first few minutes of an interview, or unfairly rebuffed by someone you just met, then you know the feeling.

Despite the risks of rash decision making, in some circumstances people can make surprisingly good choices in the blink of an eye (Gladwell, 2004). The best snap judgments come from people whose decisions are based on expertise and experience. However, even non-experts can be good at making some split-second decisions. For example, many speed daters are able to use physically observable traits to determine whether a person they have just met will become a romantic partner (Kurzban & Weeden, 2005). And researchers have found that inferences about politicians based on snap judgments of their looks alone can be surprisingly accurate (Wänke et al., 2013).

Snap judgments become particularly problematic when they are based on **stereotyping**—exaggerated beliefs associated with a categorizing system. Stereotypes, which people automatically make on "primitive categories" such as race, gender, and age (Devos, 2014), may be founded on a kernel of truth. However, they go beyond the facts at hand, promote claims with little or no valid basis, and endure because of untested assumptions (Cox et al., 2022). Some stereotypes develop early in life. For example, the stereotype that girls are less interested than boys in computer science and engineering shows up in children as young as six across a host of racial, ethnic, and gender intersections (Master et al., 2021).

Three characteristics distinguish stereotypes from reasonable generalizations:

- The first involves *categorizing others on the basis of easily recognized but not necessarily significant characteristics*.

For example, perhaps the first thing you notice about a person are facial features such as skin color, yet complexion is not nearly as important as intelligence or achievements (Brooks & Freeman, 2019).

- The second feature that characterizes stereotypes is *ascribing a set of characteristics to most or all members of a group*. For example, you might unfairly assume that all older people are doddering or that all men are insensitive to women's concerns (Hummert, 2011).
- Finally, stereotyping involves *applying the generalization to a particular person*. Once you believe all old people are out of touch or all men are callous, it's a short step to considering a particular older person as oblivious or a particular man as sexist.

By adulthood, we tend to engage in stereotyping frequently, effortlessly, and often unconsciously, using what researchers call *implicit bias* to make judgments based on race/ethnicity or gender (Calaza et al., 2021). (See the Dark Side feature in this section.) Once we create and hold these biases, we seek out isolated behaviors that support inaccurate beliefs in an attempt to be cognitively consistent. Health care providers, for example, tend to see their Native American patients as challenging and noncompliant (Zestcott et al., 2021). Implicit bias also helps explain why children and adults associate men with brilliance more readily than women, despite disagreeing with that explicit stereotype (Storage et al., 2020).

One way to avoid the kinds of communication problems that come from excessive stereotyping is to *decategorize*, or treat people as

individuals. Changing labels can aid this process. Avoiding use of irrelevant descriptors (e.g., compare "female doctor" to "doctor" or "male nurse" to nurse) might help you and others perceive people more neutrally.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Implicit Bias and Its Effects

The Perception Institute uses the term *implicit bias* to describe "when we have attitudes towards people or associate stereotypes with them without conscious knowledge" (perception.org). This bias can lead to prejudicial attitudes and actions that harm interpersonal relations. According to the Institute, implicit bias is a universal phenomenon not limited by race, gender, or country of origin.

Stanford researcher Jennifer Eberhardt has spent her career studying this phenomenon. The title of her 2019 book speaks to her conclusions: *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do.* Eberhardt begins the book with a story about her son worrying that a fellow Black passenger would blow up a plane. She offered this example "to show how deep implicit bias is and how it can affect everyone, even a black child" (Luscombe, 2019). Eberhardt acknowledges that she, like everyone, has unconscious prejudices. She regards them as part of life rather than character flaws: "You don't have to have a moral failing to act on an implicit bias."

Eberhardt's research focuses on biases that associate Black people with crime. She works with police departments to bring

these prejudices to the surface. As an example of how biases can affect actions, she notes that in one major city, 1 out of 4 arrested Black people were handcuffed, while only 1 in 15 white arrestees received the same treatment. Eberhardt says that people need to be aware of their prejudices and avoid jumping to hasty conclusions: "We can slow down and make a shift so we're less likely to act on bias."

The Perception Institute has an implicit bias test on its website, and many organizations use some version of this exam. You might want to take one of these inventories to see if you have biases that unconsciously affect your interactions with others.

5.3.2 We Cling to First Impressions

Snap judgments are significant because initial impressions of others often carry more weight than the ones that follow. This is due in part to what social scientists call the **primacy effect**: the tendency to pay more attention to, and to better recall, things that happen first in a sequence (Sullivan, 2019). You can probably recall first impressions you held of people who are now your close friends. With some it was "like at first sight." With others, your initial appraisal was negative and it took some time and effort for it to change. Either way, your first impressions played a significant role in the interactions that followed.

The term **halo effect** describes the tendency to form an overall positive impression of a person on the basis of one positive characteristic. Positive first impressions are often based on physical attractiveness, which can lead people to attribute all sorts of other virtues to a good-looking person (Peterson & Palmer, 2017). For example, employment interviewers rate mediocre but physically attractive job applicants higher than less attractive candidates (Watkins & Johnston, 2000). The opposite principle also holds true. The **horns effect** (also called the "devil" or "pitchfork" effect) occurs when a negative appraisal adversely influences the perceptions that follow (Burton et al., 2015).

Once we form a first impression—whether it's positive or negative—we are susceptible to **confirmation bias**: the tendency to seek out and organize impressions to support that opinion (Liden et al., 2019). For example, experimental subjects asked more suspicious questions when they believed that a suspect had been cheating on a task (Hill et al., 2008). The same bias occurs in job interviews: Once a potential employer forms a positive impression, the tendency is to ask questions that confirm the employer's image of the applicant (Powell et al., 2012). The interviewer might ask leading questions aimed at supporting her positive views ("What valuable lessons did you learn from that setback?"), interpret answers in a positive light ("Ah, taking time away from school to travel was a good idea!"), encourage the applicant ("Good point!"), and sell the company's virtues ("I think you would like working here"). Likewise, applicants who create a negative first impression are operating under a cloud that may be impossible to dispel.

A study of college roommates shows all these effects at work. Roommates who had positive initial impressions of each other were likely to have positive subsequent interactions, manage their conflicts constructively, and continue living together (Marek et al., 2004). The opposite was also true: Roommates who got off to a bad start tended to spiral negatively. This finding reinforces the wisdom and importance of the old adage, "You never get a second chance to make a first impression."

5.3.3 We Judge Ourselves More Charitably Than We Judge Others

Whereas we may evaluate others critically, we tend to judge ourselves more generously. Social scientists use two theories to explain this phenomenon. The first is called the **fundamental attribution error**: the tendency to give more weight to personal qualities than to the situation when making attributions (Wieman & Welsh, 2016). For instance, if someone you know makes a hurtful comment, you're likely to chalk it up to flaws in that person's character (mean spirited) than to external factors (fatigue, peer pressure). We're more charitable when judging ourselves. This **self-serving bias** means that when we perform poorly, we usually blame external forces—and when we perform well, we credit ourselves rather than the situation (Genschow & Lange, 2022).

Consider a few examples of using different standards when making attributions of ourselves and others:

- When *they* botch a job, we think they weren't listening well; when *we* make the mistake, the problem was unclear directions.
- When *he* makes an overly critical comment, it's because he's insensitive; when *we* do, it's constructive criticism.
- When *she* is uncivil online, it's because of a flaw in her character; when *we* are uncivil, it's the online platform's fault (Sude & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023).
- When *you're* deceptive, it's for personal gain; when *I'm* deceptive, it's for the good of the team (Yoon et al., 2019).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

You, Not I, Have a Social Media Problem

> "He posts too many food photos. I don't need to know everything he eats."
>
> "She posts too many selfies. Seems a bit stuck on herself."
>
> "They post too often. Enough with the hourly updates."

You probably know people who fit these descriptions. But is it possible that *you're* guilty of these behaviors? It depends on who you ask.

Researchers ran interviews to determine the kinds of social media behaviors that people find annoying. Then they ran

surveys to see who were likely perpetrators. Here are some of their findings:

- Consistent with the principle of self-serving bias, respondents said others were guiltier of social media infractions than they were themselves. *You post like crazy; I post judiciously.*
- Other people were perceived as more susceptible to online ads and news items than were the respondents. *You're gullible; I'm savvy.*
- Close friends were seen as using social media more wisely than did mere acquaintances. *My good friends are smart; strangers are not.*

This serves as a reminder that people aren't impartial judges of their own behavior. We tend to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt—and we often extend that benefit to close friends as well.

Pham, G. V., Shancer, M., & Nelson, M. R. (2019). Only *other* people post food photos on Facebook: Third-person perception of social media behavior and effects. *Computers in Human Behavior, 93*, 129–140.

One study of hurtful messages shows how self-serving bias can operate in romantic relationships (Young et al., 2015). Researchers asked couples to discuss a relational conflict for seven minutes. Afterward, each partner viewed a recording of the conversation and counted the number of times something hurtful was said. The couples often disagreed on which comments were hurtful. In fact,

they agreed only 20 percent of the time. But one thing was consistent: Participants regularly attributed more hurtful comments to their partners than to themselves. (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for a self-appraisal of your self-serving bias tendencies.)

5.3.4 We Are Influenced by Our Expectations

Suppose you took a class and were told in advance that the instructor was terrific. Would this expectation affect the way you perceived the teacher? Research shows that it almost certainly would (Sohn et al., 2019). In one study, students who read positive comments about instructors on a website viewed those teachers as more credible and attractive than did students who were not exposed to the same comments (Edwards & Edwards, 2013).

Expectations don't always lead to more positive appraisals. They can become a set up for disappointment. If you are told that someone you are about to meet is extremely attractive, you may be let down when the person doesn't live up to your unrealistic mental image. Similarly, when a romantic relationship doesn't match your expectations, you're likely to be less satisfied with it than if your bar had been lower (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2018). Expectations influence the way we see others, both positively and negatively—and may lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (Gentrup et al., 2020).

This is an important point to remember when making decisions about others. Many professions require that manuscripts submitted

to journals be evaluated through "blind review"—that is, without identifying information that might influence the evaluator's appraisal. Orchestras often use "blind auditions," where musicians perform behind a screen (Rice, 2013). In the same way, you can probably think of situations when it would be wise to avoid seeking advance information about another person you meet.

5.3.5 We Are Influenced by the Obvious

Being influenced by what is most obvious is understandable. As you read earlier, we select stimuli from the environment that are noticeable—that is, intense, repetitious, unusual, or otherwise attention grabbing. The most obvious factor, however, is not necessarily the only cause—or the most significant one—of an event. For example:

- You might scold the child who lashes out loudest when two children (or adults, for that matter) fight. Perhaps the other one was at least equally responsible, however, teasing or refusing to cooperate.
- You might complain about an acquaintance whose malicious gossiping or arguing has become a bother, forgetting that by putting up with that kind of behavior you have been at least partially responsible.
- You might blame an unhappy work situation on the boss, overlooking other factors beyond that person's control such

as a change in the economy, the policy of higher management, or demands of customers or other workers. These examples show that it is important to take time to gather all the facts before arriving at a conclusion.

In the film *Tall Girl*, classmates overlook the other qualities of Jodi Kreyman (Ava Michelle) because "when you're a tall girl, it's the only thing people notice." At 6'1", Jodi is just as fixated on height: the primary feature she looks for in a romantic partner is tallness. ***How do physical characteristics affect your perception of yourself and others?*** View larger image

5.3.6 We Assume Others Are Like Us

We commonly imagine that others share our attitudes and motives (Liu et al., 2018). The frequently mistaken assumption that others' views are similar to your own applies in a wide range of situations. For example:

- You heard a slightly raunchy joke that you found funny. You assume that it won't offend a friend. It does.
- You were bothered by an instructor's tendency to digress during lectures. If you were a professor, you'd want to hear constructive criticism, so you decide to share it, expecting the professor to be grateful. Unfortunately, you're wrong.
- You lost your temper with a friend a week ago and said some things you regret. In fact, if someone said those things to you, you would consider the relationship finished. Imagining that your friend feels the same way, you avoid making contact. In fact, your friend feels that he was partly responsible and has avoided you because he thinks you're the one who wants to end things.

These examples show that others don't always think or feel the way we do and that assuming similarities can lead to problems. Sometimes you can find out the other person's real position by asking directly, sometimes by checking with others, and sometimes by making an educated guess after you've thought the matter

through. All these alternatives are better than simply assuming everyone would react the way you do.

The perceptual tendencies described in this section aren't always mistaken. Sometimes, for instance, people *are* responsible for their misfortunes, or your problems *are not* your fault. Likewise, the most obvious interpretation of a situation may be the correct one. Nonetheless, considerable research has shown again and again that perceptions of others are often distorted in the ways we have described. The moral, then, is clear: Don't assume your perceptions are accurate or unbiased.

5.4 Synchronizing Our Perceptions

After reading this far, you can appreciate how out of sync our perceptions of one another can be. These mismatched perceptions can interfere with communication—and they can increase exponentially. As one communication scholar wryly puts it, confusion emerges "whenever we try to imagine what others think we think they think" (Anton, 2015). What's necessary, then, are tools to help others understand your perceptions and for you, in turn, to understand theirs. In this section, we introduce two such tools.

5.4.1 Perception Checking

Given the likelihood for perceptual errors, it's easy to see how a communicator can leap to the wrong conclusion and make inaccurate assumptions. Consider the defense-arousing potential of incorrect accusations such as these:

> "Why are you mad at me?" (Who said I was?)
>
> "What's the matter with you?" (Who said anything was the matter?)
>
> "Come on now. Tell the truth." (Who said I was lying?)

Even if your interpretations are correct, these kinds of mind-reading statements are likely to generate defensiveness. The skill of **perception checking** provides a better way to review your assumptions and to share your interpretations (Marie, 2018). A complete perception check has three parts:

1. A description of the behavior you noticed.
2. Two possible interpretations of the behavior.
3. A request for clarification about how to interpret the behavior.

Perception checks for the preceding three examples would look like this:

> "When you stomped out of the room and slammed the door [behavior], I wasn't sure whether you were mad at me [first interpretation] or just in a hurry [second interpretation]. How did you feel? [request for clarification]"
>
> "You haven't laughed much in the last couple of days [behavior]. It makes me wonder whether something's bothering you [first interpretation] or whether you're just being quiet [second interpretation]. What's up? [request for clarification]"
>
> "You said you really liked the job I did [behavior], but there was something about your voice that made me think you may not like it [first interpretation]. Maybe it's just my imagination, though [second interpretation]. How do you really feel? [request for clarification]"

Perception checking helps us understand others accurately instead of assuming our first interpretation is correct. Because its goal is mutual understanding, this cooperative approach to communication signals an attitude of respect and concern for the other person. It says, in effect, "I know I'm not qualified to judge you without some help."

Sometimes an effective perception check won't need all the parts listed in the preceding example to be effective:

"You haven't dropped by lately. Is anything the matter? [single interpretation with request for clarification]"

"I can't tell whether you're kidding me about being cheap or if you're serious [behavior combined with two interpretations]. Are you mad at me? [request for clarification]"

"Are you sure you don't mind driving? I can use a ride if it's no trouble, but I don't want to take you out of your way [request for clarification comes first; no need to describe behavior]."

The straightforward approach of perception checking has the best chance of working in what we identified in Chapter 3 as *low-context cultures*, ones in which members value candor and self-disclosure. The dominant cultures of the United States, Australia, Canada, and Germany, for example, fit into this category. Members of these groups are most likely to appreciate the kind of straight talking that perception checking embodies. On the other hand, members of *high-context cultures* (more common in Latin America and Asia) value social harmony over clarity. High-context communicators are more

likely to regard candid approaches such as perception checking as potentially embarrassing, preferring instead less direct ways of understanding one another.

Along with clarifying meaning, perception checking can sometimes be a face-saving way to raise an issue without directly threatening or attacking the other person. Consider these examples:

> "Were you going to drop off the rent check tomorrow?"
>
> "Am I boring you, or do you have something else on your mind?"

In the first case, you might have been quite sure that your roommate had forgotten to deliver the rent check, and in the second that the other person was bored. Even so, a perception check is a less threatening way of pointing out their behavior than direct confrontation. Remember that one element of competent communication is the ability to choose the best option from a large repertoire, and perception checking can be a useful strategy at times. (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter to build your skill at perception checking.)

Watch and Discuss 5.2: "The Importance of Empathy"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. What is the relationship between *perception* and *empathy*?
2. Explain what the video means when it says, "Empathy is a two-way street."

5.4.2 Building Empathy

Perception checking can help us decode messages more accurately, but it doesn't provide enough information for us to claim that we fully understand another person. For example, a professor who uses perception checking might learn that a student's reluctance to ask questions is due to confusion and not lack of interest. This information would be helpful, but imagine how much more effective professors would be if they could get a sense of the confusion from the student's perspective. Likewise, parents who use perception checking might find that their teenager's outlandish behavior grows from a desire to be accepted. But to truly understand this behavior, the parents would need to consider (or perhaps recall) what it feels like to crave that acceptance.

"How would you feel if the mouse did that to you?"

Empathy Defined

What we need, then, to understand others more completely is **empathy**—the ability to recreate another person's perspective, to experience the world from that person's point of view (Geist, 2013). It is impossible to achieve total empathy, but with enough effort and skill, we can come closer to this goal (Krause, 2010).

Empathy has three dimensions. On one level, empathy involves *perspective-taking*—the ability to take on the viewpoint of another person (Manohar & Appiah, 2016). This understanding requires a suspension of judgment so that for the moment you set aside your own opinions and take on those of the other person. Besides cognitive understanding, empathy also has an affective dimension—

what social scientists term *emotional contagion*. In everyday language, emotional contagion means that we experience the same feelings that others have. We know their fear, joy, sadness, and so on. A third ingredient of empathy is a genuine *concern* for the welfare of the other person. Not only do we think and feel as others do, but we have a sincere interest in their well-being. Full empathy requires both intellectual understanding of the other person's position and an affective understanding of the other's feelings (Carré et al., 2013). (You can check your empathy quotient with the Assessing Your Communication quiz at the end of the chapter.)

It's easy to confuse empathy with *sympathy*, but the concepts are different (Kramer, 2018). With sympathy, you view the other person's situation from your point of view. With empathy, you view it from the other person's perspective. Consider the difference between sympathizing and empathizing with a person who lost a loved one, for example. When you sympathize, your feelings focus on the other person's confusion, joy, or pain. When you empathize, the experience becomes your own, at least for the moment. It's one thing to feel bad (or good) *for* someone; it's more profound to feel bad (or good) *with* someone.

Experiencing Empathy

Empathy may be valuable, but it isn't always easy to achieve (Ickes & Hodges, 2013). In fact, it's hardest to empathize with people who are radically different from us in categories such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status (Goleman, 2013). To make such perceptual

leaps, you need to develop open-mindedness, imagination, and commitment. The good news is that researchers are learning that empathy is less an inborn trait, like height, than a learnable skill, like playing chess (Dorough et al., 2021). This is especially true when there's a will to empathize, and a belief that doing so is possible (Schumann et al., 2014).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Want to Understand Someone's Perspective? Ask.

This section introduces the idea of *perspective-taking*—gaining empathy by adopting the viewpoint of another person. A research team discovered that *how* you gain another's perspective can affect the accuracy of your understanding.

Typical advice in perspective-taking is to put yourself in another's shoes—*imagine* how that person might feel. A series of studies showed that simple mental conjuring isn't enough. It's nearly impossible to set aside your own perceptual filters to take on the mindset of another person. In fact, participants often had *lower* accuracy in understanding others when instructed to "take their perspective."

There's a better, communication-based solution. If you want to understand another's perspective, ask questions. Inquiring "How are you feeling?" or "What's your opinion?" beats assuming you know how that person feels or thinks. This lines up with the perception-checking skill discussed in this chapter.

The researchers still see value in imagining yourself in others' shoes—it's a good mental exercise. But they conclude:

"If you really want to know what's on the mind of another person, it is hard to do better than getting their perspective by just asking them."

Eyal, T., Steffal, M., & Epley, N. (2018). Perspective mistaking: Accurately understanding the mind of another requires getting perspective, not taking perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 114*, 547–571.

The best way to gain empathy for people whose point of view differs from yours is by interacting with them (Zhang, 2016). We can also empathize by attempting to experience the world from another's perspective. Rachel Kolb (2016) describes such a moment. As a deaf person born to a hearing family, she is fluent in both American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken English (which she understands by lip reading). Kolb was having lunch with a hearing friend, who agreed to converse in ASL instead of spoken English. That conversation was an eye-opener.

> … after a few minutes, my usually bold, un-self-conscious friend stopped. She chuckled and shrugged a little, and said, "I feel like everyone here is *looking at us*."
>
> I glanced around the small cafe, at all the hearing people sitting at their tables. Indeed, some had craned their necks to look at our movements, but this was behavior I'd long ago ceased to notice. "Yeah," I signed back, bluntly. "That often happens."
>
> My friend smiled. A moment later, we started conversing again, and I think then she understood: *This* is what it can be like to occupy a signing body.

Simulations can also help you experience another person's reality. For instance, spending even a short time in a virtual body of someone whose race differs from yours can help you understand how the world looks and feels to them (Hogenboom, 2013). Literally—or, at least, virtually—inhabiting the body of another provides the basis for developing empathy, which can reduce bias. Similarly, college

students who took on avatars of older adults and entered their virtual environment developed new attitudes toward the aged (Yee & Bailenson, 2006).

Experiencing empathy for others is essential, but it isn't the final interpersonal goal. The ultimate objective is to *communicate* your empathy to your relational partners. Chapter 8 describes listening response skills such as empathizing and supporting that let your interactional partners know you identify with them. Research shows that communicating understanding of your partner's perspective enhances relational satisfaction (Kellas et al., 2017). Personal and relational well-being also increases in families of LGBTQ children who take the perspective of their parents when they come out (Butauski & Horstman, 2020). For example, a son might say to his mom and dad, "I know you're worried that being gay could make my life more difficult. And I might be discriminated against or bullied." Broaching the topic validates parents' perspectives even if the child doesn't share their fears.

Responding with compassion even to villains who have wronged him in the past, Peter Parker (Tom Holland) in the film *No Way Home* exhibits empathy that makes him a superhero among superheroes. ***How can you develop empathy for those who have hurt you or with whom you fundamentally disagree?*** View larger image

Empathy and Ethics

The "golden rule" of treating others as we want to be treated points to the clear relationship between empathy and the ethical principles that enable society to function (Howe, 2013).

A look at criminal behavior demonstrates the link between empathy, ethics, and communication. Typically, people who have committed

the most offensive crimes against others, such as rape and child abuse, do not express any sense of how their actions affected the victims (Clements et al., 2007). New treatments attempt to change behavior by instilling the ability to imagine how others are feeling (Day et al., 2010). In these programs, offenders read and watch emotional accounts of crimes similar to the ones they have committed. Offenders also write accounts of what their crimes must have felt like to the victim, read these stories to others in therapy groups, and even experience simulated reenactments in which they play the role of the victim. Through strategies such as these, therapists try to help offenders develop the empathy required to have an ethical approach to the world.

While having too little empathy can be a concern, it's also possible to feel and extend too *much* empathy. People in the helping professions in particular may experience "empathy burnout" and "compassion fatigue" (Ferraro, 2020). These syndromes take a toll on mental and emotional health, both in the workplace and at home. Supervisors and workers in these professions have an ethical obligation to make sure that helpers—nurses, teachers, counselors, police, social workers, and the like—take care of themselves as well as others. (See Activity 4 at the end of the chapter for an ethical challenge about overextending empathy.)

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 5.1 **Understand the four steps in the perception process.**

Interpersonal perception involves four phases: selection, organization, interpretation, and negotiation.

Q: Recall an important exchange in which you viewed matters differently from your relational partner. Describe how you selected, organized, and interpreted the other person's behavior and how your partner perceived the exchange differently. How successful were you in negotiating a shared perception of what happened?

Objective 5.2 **Identify the variety of influences on interpersonal perception.**

Physiological influences on perception include the senses, age, health and fatigue, biological cycles, hunger, and neurobehavioral challenges. Psychological influences such as mood and self-concept also have a strong influence on how we regard others. In addition, social influences such as sex and gender roles, occupational roles, and relational roles play an important part in the way we view those with whom we

interact. Finally, cultural influences shape how we recognize and make sense of others' words and actions.

Q: Identify instances in which the physiological, psychological, social, and cultural influences described in this chapter shaped your perceptions and consequently your interpersonal communication.

Objective 5.3 **Recognize how common tendencies in perception shape interpersonal communication.**

We tend to make snap judgments and cling to first impressions, even if they are mistaken. We are more likely to blame others than ourselves for misfortunes. We are influenced by our expectations. We also are influenced by obvious stimuli, even if they are not the most important factors. Finally, we assume others are similar to us.

Q: Describe a case in which the perceptual tendencies described in this chapter shaped your perceptions and consequently your communication. How might the incident have turned out differently if you had not succumbed to these perceptual errors?

Objective 5.4 **Use perception checking and adjust attitudes to enhance empathy with communication partners.**

One way to coordinate interpretations with others is through perception checking. Instead of jumping to conclusions, communicators who check their perceptions describe the behavior they noticed, offer two equally plausible interpretations, and ask for clarification from their partner.

Empathy is the ability to experience the world from another person's perspective. There are three dimensions to empathy: perspective-taking, emotional involvement, and concern for the other person. Requirements for empathy include open-mindedness, imagination, and commitment.

Q: Construct a perception-checking statement to clarify your understanding in an important relationship. How might this approach affect the relationship if you presented it using the empathy-enhancing attitudes described in this chapter?

ACTIVITIES

1. **Reflection**: Review the material on "Occupational Roles" and "Relational Roles" in Section 5.2.3. Identify a job you've held or a relationship you've been in that has affected your perception and communication. Offer specific examples of how that role changed your perspective and behavior. (Possible examples: If you've been a server, how do you perceive and treat restaurant staff as a customer? If you're close with a grandparent, does that affect how you perceive and treat older adults?)
2. **Self-Appraisal:** Section 5.3.3 explains that we tend to judge ourselves more charitably than we judge others. Review that section (including its Focus on Research sidebar) and see if you can identify times when you've engaged in self-serving bias. Examples might come from comparisons with a sibling, a coworker, or a friendly rival. How might acknowledging your bias help you form more accurate perceptions of yourself and others? How might it shape the way you communicate?
3. **Build Your Skill:** Improve your perception-checking ability by developing complete perception-checking statements for each of the following situations. As

explained in Section 5.4.1, be sure your statements include a description of the behavior, two plausible interpretations, and a request for verification.

   a. You made what you thought was an excellent suggestion to your boss. Your boss replied, "I'll get back to you about that right away." It's been 3 weeks and you haven't received a response yet.
   b. You haven't received the usual weekly phone call from your family in nearly a month. Last time you spoke, you had an argument about where to spend the holidays.

4. **Ethical Challenge:** The "Empathy and Ethics" section at the end of the chapter describes how those in the helping professions may experience "empathy burnout" or "compassion fatigue" from the stress of caring for their clients. But you don't need to be in those professions to feel burnout from your care and concern for others. What is your ethical obligation to show empathy to those in need when doing so is a burden? Are there boundaries to be drawn? If so, when and how do you draw them?

Assessing Your Communication: Your Empathy Quotient (Personal Practice)

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

attribution

confirmation bias

empathy

fundamental attribution error

gender

halo effect

horns effect

Interpretation

Negotiation

organization

perception checking

primacy effect

punctuation

selection

self-serving bias

standpoint theory

stereotyping

CHAPTER 5 Flashcards

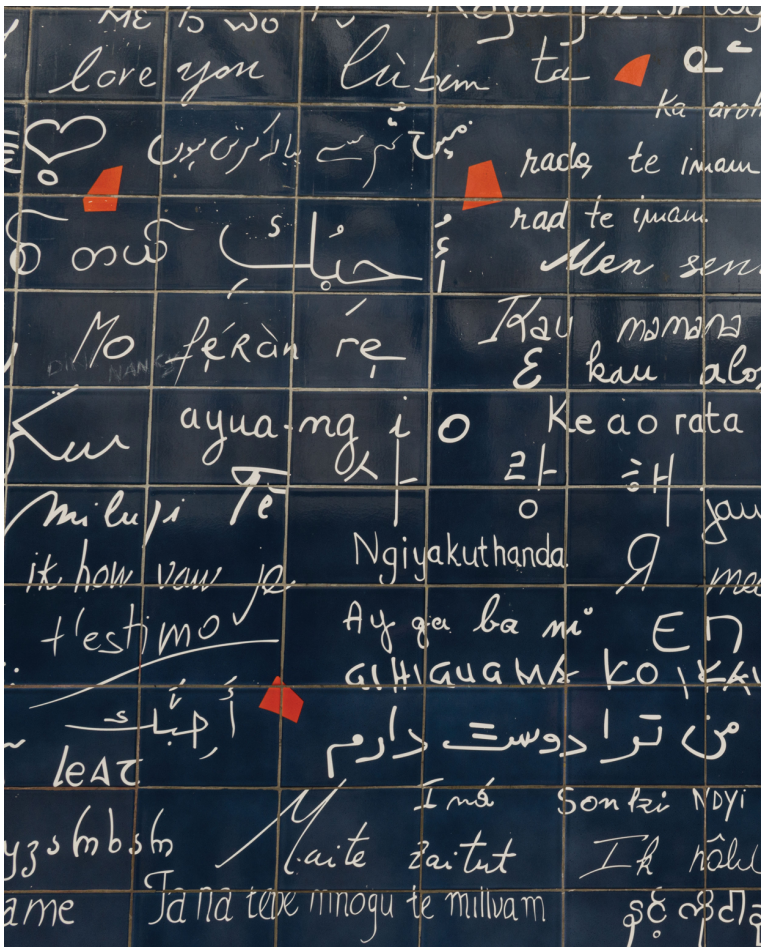
[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

6
Language

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **6.1** Explain the symbolic, rule-based, subjective, culture-bound nature of language.
- **6.2** Recognize the impact, both positive and negative, of language in interpersonal relationships.
- **6.3** Use language that reflects responsibility for thoughts and actions.

6.4 Describe the influence gender has on language use in interpersonal relationships.

IMAGINE FOR A MINUTE the silent chaos of a world without words. A solitary existence without a written or spoken language to convey a thought experiment such as this—or share any idea or emotion for that matter. While this scenario is unfathomable to most, for Elizabeth Bonker it could have been her lifelong reality. Instead, aided by technology and supported by family, friends, and instructors, she delivered a valedictorian address at Rollins College:

> *I have typed this speech with one finger with a communication partner holding a keyboard. I am one of the lucky few non-speaking autistics who have been taught to type. That one critical intervention unlocked my mind from its silent cage, enabling me to communicate and to be educated like my hero, Helen Keller*.

Elizabeth's speech encourages others to use their voice for service, following in the footsteps of the college's most famous alum and America's most famous neighbor, Mr. Rogers. To that end, she has already established a nonprofit aptly named Communication 4 All, which works to ensure communication access to the 31 million nonspeaking people worldwide with autism.

"God gave you a voice. Use it," Elizabeth Bonker told her fellow graduates. "And no, the irony of a nonspeaking autistic encouraging you to use your voice is not lost on me." (Chappell, 2022) View larger image

Language is arguably the most essential component of human communication. As Toni Morrison said in her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives." This chapter explores the relationship between words and ideas. It describes some important characteristics of language and shows how these affect our day-to-day communication. It outlines several types of troublesome language and shows how to replace them with more effective kinds of speech. Finally, it considers the influence of gender on language use.

6.1 The Nature of Language

We begin by looking at some features that characterize all verbal communication. These features explain both why language is such a useful tool and why it can be so troublesome.

6.1.1 Language Is Symbolic

The famous linguist Ferdinand de Saussure observed that language consists of arbitrary symbols that have no meaning in themselves. The connection between a spoken word (the signifier) and the object or concept it represents (the signified) is neither necessary nor inherent (Joseph, 2012). For example, the word *five* is a kind of code that represents the number of fingers on your hand only because we agree that it does. As Bateson and Jackson (1964) point out, "There is nothing particularly five-like in the number 'five.'" To a French speaker, the symbol *cinq* would convey the same meaning; to a computer, the same value would be represented by the digitally coded symbol *0101*.

Sign language is equally symbolic (Capirci et al., 2022). Hundreds of different sign languages used around the world have evolved independently, whenever significant numbers of deaf people have come in contact (Tcherneshoff, 2018). These distinct languages

include American Sign Language, Mexican Sign Language, British Sign Language, Chinese Sign Language, and Australian Aboriginal Sign Languages—and communicating across them can be as difficult as it is across different spoken languages. Tensions can also arise across generations as younger users adapt signs to accommodate new technology and reflect shifting cultural norms. "ASL linguists emphasize that there is no right or wrong choice for a sign—because language is shaped by those who use it" (Morris, 2022).

6.1.2 Language Is Rule-Governed

The only reason symbol-laden languages work at all is that people agree on how to use them. The linguistic agreements that make communication possible can be codified in rules. Languages contain several types of rules that continually evolve (Nölle et al., 2020). **Phonological rules** govern how sounds are combined to form words. For instance, the words *champagne*, *double*, and *occasion* have the same meanings in French as in English, but their pronunciations differ across the two languages because of differing phonological rules.

Whereas phonological rules determine how spoken language sounds, **syntactic rules** govern the way symbols can be arranged. Notice that the following statements contain the same words, but the shift in syntax creates quite different meanings:

> Whiskey makes you sick when you're well.
>
> Whiskey, when you're sick, makes you well.

Although most of us aren't able to describe the syntactic rules that govern our language, it's easy to recognize their existence when speech does not conform to them. But language that may seem ungrammatical or deficient could simply be following a different set of syntactic rules reflecting regional or co-cultural dialects. For example, phrases like "I'm not saying nothin'" or "he be walkin'" can stigmatize speakers of Black English (BE) as uneducated or unintelligent when in fact this form of expression is part of a rich oral tradition to which standard American English is greatly indebted (Luu, 2020). BE's linguistic creativity has long enriched the stories, poetry, and music of popular culture. And more recently, social media has benefitted from its innovations (Grieve et al., 2018).

Semantic rules govern the meaning of language as opposed to its structure. These make it possible for us to agree that "bikes" are for riding and "books" are for reading. Without semantic rules, communication would be impossible; each of us would use symbols in unique ways, unintelligible to others.

Semantic rules help us understand the meaning of individual words, but they often don't explain how language operates in everyday life. Consider the statement "Let's get together later." The semantic meaning of the words in this sentence is clear enough, yet the statement could be taken in several ways. It could be a straightforward invitation ("I hope we can get together"), a polite command ("See me"), or even an evasive rejection ("I don't really want to see you"). We learn to distinguish the accurate meanings of such speech acts through **pragmatic rules**, which tell us what uses

and interpretations of a message are appropriate in a given context (Papafragou, 2018).

When all players understand and use the same pragmatic rules, smooth communication is possible. For example, one rule specifies that the relationship between communicators affects the meaning of a statement. “I want to see you” is likely to mean one thing when uttered by your boss and another entirely when it comes from your lover. Setting is also important: “I want to see you” will probably have a different meaning at the office than at a party. Of course, the nonverbal behaviors that accompany a statement also help us decode its meaning.

WHEN PROCESSING LANGUAGE, BE CAREFUL OF CONTEXT. MANY LANGUAGES USE DOUBLE NEGATIVES TO MEAN POSITIVES.
LUCKILY FOR US, THOUGH, NO LANGUAGE USES DOUBLE POSITIVES TO MEAN NEGATIVES.
YEAH, RIGHT.

People in individual relationships create their own sets of pragmatic rules. Consider the use of humor: The teasing and jokes you exchange with gusto with one friend might be considered tasteless or offensive in another relationship. For instance, imagine an email message typed in CAPITAL LETTERS and filled with CURSE WORDS, INSULTS, NAME-CALLING, and EXCLAMATION MARKS!!! How would you interpret such a message? An outside observer might consider this an example of “flaming” and be

appalled, when in fact the message might be a fun-loving case of "verbal jousting" between buddies (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003).

Pragmatic rules work well in close relationships as long as the communicators understand one another's intentions. For example, ethnic or racial teasing is common among adolescent peers, and the participants usually consider it harmless (Douglass et al., 2016). In the same manner, young partners in romantic relationships usually treat playful insults as positive messages (Korobov, 2017). If you have a good friend or partner whom you call a politically incorrect nickname as a term of endearment, then you understand the concept. Keep in mind, however, that those who aren't privy to your relationship's pragmatic rules are likely to misunderstand you, so you'll want to be wise about when and where to use these personal codes. For more on this topic, see the discussion of racist and sexist language later in this chapter.

6.1.3 Language Is Subjective

If the rules of language were precise and everyone followed them identically, there would be fewer misunderstandings. But language use isn't objective and universal; it's subjective and personal (Rodd, 2020). You have an hour-long argument about "feminism" only to discover that you each were using the term in different ways, even though you were in basic agreement about its principles. You tease a friend in what you mean to be a playful manner, but your friend takes you seriously and is offended.

These problems occur because people attach different meanings to the same message. Here's an example:

PERSON A: I got a speeding ticket last night when I borrowed your car. The fine is $300.

PERSON B: Oh, I'm sorry!

PERSON A (CONFUSED): Why are you sorry? I'll pay the fine.

PERSON B (ANNOYED): I wasn't apologizing because you drove too fast. I meant I'm sorry to hear you got the ticket.

These people are assigning different meanings to the phrase, "I'm sorry" (Hax, 2019). For Person B, it means "I'm sad that happened to you." It's an expression of empathy in which "sorry" means "sorrowful." For Person A, "I'm sorry" means "I apologize"—and it doesn't make sense to A that B is apologizing for the speeding ticket. A Chapter 1 principle comes back in play: Meanings are in and among people. The phrase "I'm sorry" has no meaning until you give it meaning.

Often the *connotations* of a word, the ideas or feelings it invokes, are more important than its *denotations*, or dictionary meanings. Consider the following: *Mom*. *Home*. *Love*. Chances are these words stir up emotions and memories, ranging from tender intimacy to crushing heartbreak. What do these terms mean? The dictionary won't provide a complete answer.

6.1.4 Language and Worldview

For more than 150 years, theorists have put forth the notion of **linguistic relativity**—that a language both reflects and shapes the worldview of those who use it (Everett, 2013). For instance, bilingual speakers seem to think differently (Athanasopoulos et al., 2015) and even experience physical pain differently (Gianola et al., 2021) when they change languages. In one study, French Americans were asked to interpret a series of pictures. When they spoke in French, their descriptions were far more romantic and emotional than when they used English to describe the same kind of images (Cook & Bassetti, 2011). In Israel, both Muslim and Jewish students saw bigger distinctions between their group and "outsiders" when using their native language than when they spoke in English, a neutral tongue in this context.

The best-known declaration of linguistic relativity is the **Sapir–Whorf hypothesis**, credited to Benjamin Whorf, an amateur linguist, and anthropologist Edward Sapir (Frothingham, 2022; Whorf, 1956). Following Sapir's theoretical work, Whorf found that the language spoken by Hopi Native Americans represented a view of reality that is dramatically different from how speakers of other languages view the world. For example, the Hopi language makes no distinction between nouns and verbs. Therefore, the people who speak it describe the entire world as being constantly in process. Whereas English speakers use nouns to characterize people or objects as being fixed or constant, the Hopi language represents them more as verbs, constantly changing. In this sense, English

represents the world rather like a collection of snapshots, whereas the Hopi representation is more like a movie.

Some languages contain terms that have no English equivalents (Slauer, 2019). For example, consider a few words in other languages that have no simple translation in English:

- *Schadenfreude* (German): the happiness felt while thinking of another's misfortune
- *Nemawashi* (Japanese): the process of informally feeling out the opinions of all the people involved with an issue before making a decision
- *Lagom* (Swedish): just the right amount, or a balanced life
- *Lao* (Mandarin): respectful term used for older people, showing their importance in the family and in society
- *Razbliuto* (Russian): sentimental feelings for someone you no longer love
- *Gigil* (Tagalog): the irresistible urge to hug something unbearably cute

It's possible to imagine concepts like these without having specific words to describe them, but linguistic relativity suggests that the terms do influence the thinking and actions of people who use them. Thus, speakers of a language that includes the notion of *lao* would probably be more inclined to treat older people respectfully, and those who are familiar with *lagom* might be more disposed to live a balanced life.

The potential impact of linguistic relativity on interpersonal communication is significant. Consider the difference between the phrases "You make me angry" and "I get angry when you. …" The first phrase says to the other person—and to yourself—that your anger is the other person's fault. The second phrase is an "I" message that takes responsibility for your emotions (a concept described later in this chapter). Changing your language not only helps reduce defensiveness in the other person, but it can also reframe how *you* see the situation. The same could happen if you begin calling female adults "women" instead of "girls" (see Watch and Discuss 6.1), or if you refer to college undergrads as "students" instead of "kids" (Hayes, 2017). You might view those people differently based on the labels you use to describe them. Your words can affect how you see the world.

Watch and Discuss 6.1: "Girl vs. Woman: Why Language Matters"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Bialik cites the *Sapir–Whorf hypothesis*. Explain how this concept relates to the case she's making.
2. What has been your experience with this issue? Do you think changes in language are necessary?

6.2 The Impact of Language

As linguistic relativity suggests, language can have a strong influence on our perceptions and how we regard one another. In this section, we examine some of the many ways language can impact our lives.

6.2.1 Naming and Identity

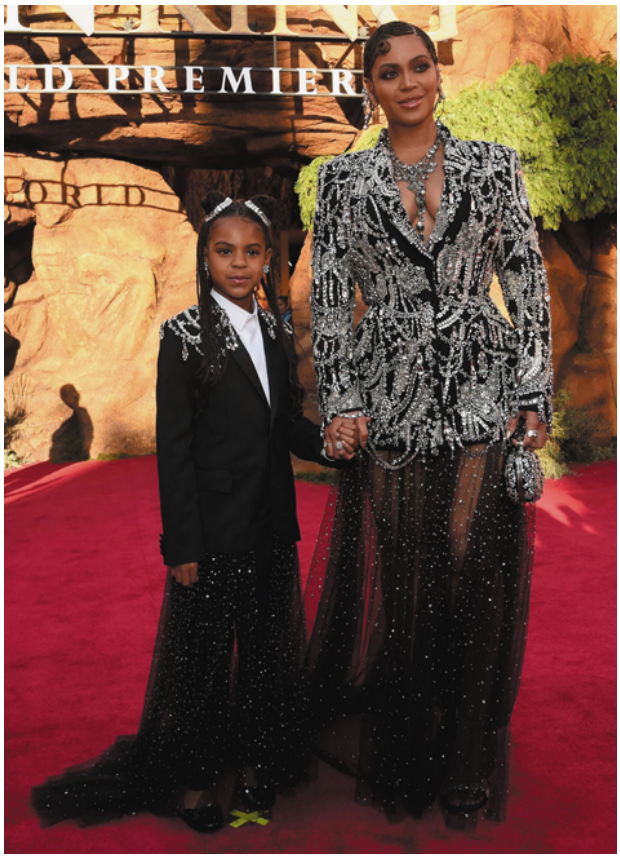
“What’s in a name?” Juliet asked rhetorically. If Romeo had been a social scientist, he would have answered, “A great deal.” As researcher David Zhu explains, “Because a name is used to identify an individual and communicate with the individual on a daily basis, it serves as the very basis of one's self-conception, especially in relation to others” (Jarrett, 2021).

For more than a century, scholars have studied the impact of rare and unusual names on the people who bear them (Christenfeld & Larsen, 2008). Early studies claimed that people with nonnormative names suffered everything from psychological and emotional disturbance to failure in college. Later studies showed that people often have negative appraisals not only of unusual names but also of unusual name spellings (Mehrabian, 2001).

But naming trends began shifting toward the end of the 20th century. For example, in some parts of the United States, nearly a third of African American girls born in the 1990s were given distinct names that belonged to no one else in the state (Dinwiddie-Boyd, 1994). From 1880 to 1960, Mary was the most popular choice for American girls every year except for six. But

for the last few decades, white parents are increasingly choosing unusual names that will stand out rather than fit in (Pinsker, 2022).

You can probably think of several unique names—of celebrities, sports stars, or even personal friends—that make the person easily recognizable and memorable. In one study, a poem signed with an unusual name was assessed as more creative than when signed by a more common name (Lebuda & Karwowski, 2013). Another study found that CEOs with unconventional names were more likely to pursue creative or unconventional business strategies (Kang et al., 2021).



Beyoncé trademarked "Blue Ivy" to prevent others from using her firstborn's name for commercial profit. While the stakes are less lucrative for most people, baby naming is still an important decision that can shape identity throughout life. ***How has your name impacted your sense of self?***
View larger image

On the negative side, immigrants run the risk of being discriminated against simply because of their names. “As a foreigner in the U.S., since the first day I arrived,” says Xian Zhao, “I have been constantly asking myself this question: Should I adopt an Anglo name?” (Pinsker, 2019). Zhao now studies the impact of first names on perception. He found that white professors were more likely to respond to an emailed request from a Chinese student when the student went by Alex, as opposed to Xian (Zhao & Biernat, 2017). More disturbingly, participants in a hypothetical moral dilemma were more willing to eliminate someone named Xian than someone named Mark —even if Mark was Asian (Zhao & Biernat, 2019).

A person’s name can be a point of pride or a source of shame. One woman described why she changed hers:

> Throughout my childhood and teenage years, my name felt like it was the most embarrassing thing in the world. It was butchered in more ways than you can imagine. I dreaded roll-call and any other event in which my name would be said aloud. I didn’t want to hear it. At all. Ever. I was ashamed. I was bullied. I was constantly laughed at. I was absolutely traumatized. I STILL hate my former name whenever I hear it. (Lodhia, 2021)

This serves as a reminder that people’s names are tied to their identity—so it’s important to pronounce them correctly and handle them with dignity. If you’ve ever had your name treated disrespectfully, you understand. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for a reflection on this topic.)

6.2.2 Affiliation

An impressive body of research shows how language can build and demonstrate solidarity with others. Communicators adapt their speech in a variety of ways to indicate affiliation and accommodation, including through their choice of vocabulary, rate of talking, number and placement of pauses, and level of politeness (Giles, 2016). In one study, the likelihood of mutual romantic interest increased when conversation partners’ language matched

(Ireland et al., 2011). The same study revealed that when couples used similar language styles while instant messaging, the chances of their relationship continuing increased by almost 50 percent. Similarly, an examination of text messages between college-age couples revealed that their linguistic alignment increased over the course of their first year together (Brinberg & Ram, 2021).

Close friends and lovers often develop a set of special terms that serve as a way of signifying their relationship (Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009). Using the same vocabulary sets these people apart from others. The same process works among members of larger groups, from street gangs to military units. **Convergence** is the process of adapting one's speech style to match that of others with whom one wants to identify (Hilte et al., 2022). This impulse may be conscious or unconscious, as when you unintentionally end up imitating an accent after listening to how someone speaks (Wade, 2022). Language matching creates bonds not only between friends in person but also between strangers online (Rains, 2016).

When two or more people feel equally positive about one another, their linguistic convergence will be mutual (Bowen et al., 2017). But when one communicator wants or needs approval, convergence is more one-sided (Muir et al., 2017). You can see this process in action when employees seeking advancement start speaking more like their superiors. One study even showed that adopting the swearing patterns of bosses and coworkers in emails is a sign that an employee is fitting into an organization's culture (Lublin, 2017). See the At Work sidebar in this section for a discussion of this topic.

The principle of speech accommodation works in reverse, too. Communicators who want to set themselves apart from others adopt the strategy of **divergence**, speaking in a way that emphasizes their differences (Gasiorek & Vincze, 2016). For example, members of an ethnic group might

use their own dialect as a way of showing solidarity with one another (Thelamour, 2022). Similarly, teens and young adults distinguish themselves from "oldsters" by inventing slang and new meanings for common words (Fajardo, 2019). Of course, this can lead to communication challenges when different generations work together. One Gen Z employee didn't understand when her older colleague used the phrase "out of pocket," and she had to explain to her colleague that "slay" was a positive term (Abril, 2022).

Of course, communicators need to be careful about when—and when not—to converge their language. For example, using ethnic or racial epithets when you're not a member of that in-group may be inappropriate and even offensive (Bianchi et al., 2019). One of the pragmatic goals of divergence is the creation of norms about who may use certain words and who may not.

@WORK

Swearing on the Job

Swearing serves a variety of communication functions (Baruch et al., 2017). It's a way to express emotions and to let others know how strongly and sincerely you feel (Feldman et al., 2017). It can be part of a compliment ("that was #$&@ing terrific!") or the worst of insults. Swearing can offend and alienate (DeFrank & Kahlbaugh, 2019), but it can also build solidarity and be a term of endearment.

Communication researchers Danette Johnson and Nicole Lewis (2010) investigated the effects of swearing in work settings. Not surprisingly, they found that the more formal the situation, the more negative the appraisal. The chosen swear word also made a difference: "F-bombs" were rated as more inappropriate than other, less-volatile terms. Gender can also be a factor. "Cursing that is acceptable and

admirable in men is often seen as unacceptable for women," cautions sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (Squeo, 2022).

Despite these findings, Stanford University professor Robert Sutton (2010) notes that choosing *not* to swear can actually violate the norms of some organizations. Moreover, he maintains that swearing on rare occasions can be effective for the shock value. (The fact that Sutton authored a book called *The No Asshole Rule* suggests that he practices what he preaches.)

But even Sutton adds a cautionary note about swearing on the job: "If you are not sure, don't do it." The rules of interpersonal competence apply: Analyze and adapt to your audience, and engage in self-monitoring. And when in doubt, err on the side of restraint, especially in written communication that leaves a paper trail (Vasel, 2019).

6.2.3 Power and Politeness

Communication researchers have identified a number of language patterns that communicate more or less power (Dillard, 2014; Hosman & Siltanen, 2006). Notice the difference between these two statements from an employee to a manager:

> Excuse me, sir. I hate to say this, but I … uh … I guess I won't be able to finish the project on time. I had a personal emergency and … well … it was just impossible to finish it by today. I'll have it to you first thing on Monday, okay?
>
> I won't be able to finish the project on time. I had a personal emergency and it was impossible to finish it by today. I will have it to you first thing on Monday.

The first statement is an example of what has been called **powerless language**: tentative and indirect word choices, with hedges and hesitations ("Excuse me, sir"; "I guess"; "okay?"). The second is labeled **powerful language**: direct and forceful word choices, with declarations and assertions ("I won't"; "I will"). Studies have shown that speakers who use

powerful speech are rated as more competent, dynamic, and attractive than speakers who sound powerless (Ng & Bradac, 1993; Reid & Ng, 1999). In addition, when it comes to employment interview outcomes, a powerful speech style results in more positive attributions of competence and employability than a powerless one (Parton et al., 2002).

A *disclaimer* is a type of powerless speech that attempts to distance a speaker from remarks that might be unwelcome. For example, you might preface a critical message by saying, "I don't mean to sound judgmental, but …" and then go on to express your disapproval. One study showed that disclaimers actually *increase* negative judgments (El-Alayli et al., 2008). For instance, the phrase "I don't mean to sound arrogant" followed by a high-handed comment led subjects to regard the speaker as *more* arrogant. Disclaimers involving other negative qualities, such as laziness and selfishness, produced similar results. It seems that disclaimers backfire because they sensitize listeners to look for—and find—precisely the qualities that the speaker is trying to disavow.

In the film *Moxie*, friends Vivian (Hadley Robinson) and Lucy (Alycia Pascual-Peña) decide to communicate less politely and more powerfully in response to harassment at their school. ***In general, do you think your language patterns need to be more powerful or more polite?***
View larger image

Some scholars question the label "powerless" because tentative and indirect speech styles can sometimes achieve goals better than more assertive approaches (Lee & Pinker, 2010). For example, evasive approaches can be attempts at **politeness**: communicating in ways that save face for both senders and receivers (Marsh, 2019).

Politeness is valued in some cultures more than others (Dunn, 2013). In Japan, saving face for others is an important goal, so communicators there tend to speak in ambiguous terms and use hedge words and qualifiers. In most Japanese sentences, the verb comes at the end of the sentence so the "action" part of the statement can be postponed. Traditional Mexican culture, with its strong emphasis on cooperation, also uses hedging to

smooth over interpersonal relationships. By not taking a firm stand with their speech mannerisms, Mexicans believe they will not make others feel ill at ease. Although Canada isn't a collectivistic culture, it lives up to its stereotype for politeness, at least on Twitter. A study of 40 million tweets found the language of Canadians to be less assertive and more agreeable, positive, and warm than that of Americans (Snefjella et al., 2018).

Even in highly assertive cultures, simply counting the number of powerful or powerless statements won't always reveal who has the most control in a relationship. Social rules often mask the real distribution of power. A boss who wants to be pleasant might say to a secretary, "Would you mind getting this file?" In truth, both boss and secretary know this is an order and not a request, but the questioning form makes the medicine less bitter. Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1994) describes how politeness can be a face-saving way of delivering an order:

> I hear myself giving instructions to my assistants without actually issuing orders: "Maybe it would be a good idea to …"; "It would be great if you could …" all the while knowing that I expect them to do what I've asked right away . … This rarely creates problems, though, because the people who work for me know that there is only one reason I mention tasks—because I want them done. I like giving instructions in this way; it appeals to my sense of what it means to be a good person … taking others' feelings into account.

As the preceding quotation suggests, high-status speakers—especially higher-status women, according to Tannen—often realize that politeness is an effective way to get their needs met while protecting the dignity of the less-powerful person. More recent research supports this earlier work: polite requests tend to be more persuasive when negotiating (Maaravi et al., 2019), and speakers who use more hedges appear not only more polite but also more competent (Paik & van Swol, 2022). One key involves adapting your style to your conversational partner (Loyd et al., 2010). If the other person is likely to perceive politeness as weakness, it may be necessary to shift to a more powerful speaking style. Conversely, if the person sees powerful speech as rude and insensitive, it might be best to use a more polite approach

(Fandrich & Beck, 2012). As always, competent communication requires flexibility and adaptability. (See Activity 2 at the end of this chapter for a self-appraisal of your linguistic power and politeness.)

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Sorry, Not Sorry

On the surface, saying "I'm sorry" seems like a good communication practice because it can help repair relationships (Forster et al., 2021). Indeed, Chapter 10 describes the importance of apologies and forgiveness in interpersonal relationships.

But scholars (Schumann & Ross, 2010) and social commentators note that women say "I'm sorry" far more often than men do, often out of habit ("I'm sorry, may I sit here?"; "I'm sorry, could you please tell me … ?"). Women may also have a lower threshold than men for what they consider a transgression or offense. Although these ritual apologies are attempts to be polite, they can suggest weakness and even subservience. "*Sorry* is simply another way of downplaying our power, of softening what we do, to seem nice," observes Jessica Bennett (2014). "And yet, how can we be deemed likable and competent if we're always sounding defensive or unsure?"

Kicking the habit requires self-awareness and a shift in vocabulary from apologetic to assertive. Instead of "Sorry I was late," you could say, "Thank you for waiting." Rather than "Sorry I can't make it," you might try, "Unfortunately, I can't make it." You can revise "Sorry, could you send me the report?" to "Please send me the report" (Castrillon, 2019).

Of course, there are times when saying "I'm sorry" is gracious, responsible, and altogether appropriate. However, competent

communicators will want to monitor how often they use the phrase and how necessary it is to say it—and adapt their language accordingly.

6.2.4 Sexism and Racism

Sexist language involves words or phrases that demean, exclude, or needlessly highlight people based on their sex or gender (Parks & Roberton, 2000). Although such language is "one of the most powerful means through which sexism and gender discrimination is perpetrated and reproduced" (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017), its use need not be deliberate or conscious. Even well-intentioned assertions can perpetuate bias by framing one gender or sex as the given standard over the other. For example, the grammatical structure of the statement "girls are as good as boys at math" suggests that this skill is more common or natural for boys than girls (Chestnut & Markman, 2018).

It's important to note these stereotypes can affect both women and men. One study analyzed 25 languages and found that their semantic structures reinforced gender stereotypes that associate men with work, careers, and business, while women are associated with home, children, and family (Lewis & Lupyan, 2020). To say that a woman *mothered* her children focuses on her nurturing behavior, but to say that a man *fathered* a child highlights only his biological role. *Career woman* implies a career is optional or unusual, as does *working mother*, which also suggests that the domestic labor of mothers isn't "real" work. Because fathers are assumed to have jobs outside the home, there is no term *working father*. Moreover, if men fail to perform the role of breadwinner, they might be called *deadbeat dads*, a term with no parallel for moms.

Sexist language tends, however, to more frequently stigmatize women. Terms like *mistress*, *cougar*, or *man-eater* have no male equivalent. And

over 200 English words signify promiscuous women, while only 20 designate men similarly (Lei, 2006). Twitter averages 419,000 sexist slurs a day based on feminine stereotypes (Felmlee et al., 2020). Perhaps that's why "attitude toward women" is a significant predictor of attitudes regarding nonsexist language (Douglas & Sutton, 2014). (See the "Assessing Your Communication" quiz on sexist language at the end of this chapter.) Negative attitudes toward transgender individuals are also correlated with greater difficulty using gender-inclusive language (Patev et al., 2019).

Gender-fair language features nonbinary personal pronouns, the most acceptable being the third-person gender-neutral *they* (Bradley, 2020). Formal recognition of linguistic alternatives has grown accordingly on campuses, at organizations, and even in some nations. In 2015 the Swedish Academy Glossary introduced "hen," a new gender-neutral pronoun that

may encourage people to see the world in less gendered ways (Tavits & Pérez, 2019). In the United States, a 2021 Pew survey found that a quarter of adults know someone who uses a gender-neutral pronoun, and half of U.S. adults (rising to 61 percent for those ages 18 to 29) would feel comfortable using one to refer to someone if asked. Opponents of this trend argue these options are unnecessary or grammatically difficult to process, while proponents of pronoun inclusivity argue this is everyone's basic right:

> Nothing may be more personal than the way in which people refer to us through our name and pronouns. Using a person's chosen name and desired pronouns is a form of mutual respect and basic courtesy. (Florentine, 2018)

Racist language reflects a worldview that classifies members of one racial group as superior (Asante, 2002). Despite its significance, not everyone agrees about what constitutes racist language. Straining credulity, some people claim that their racist statements were a "slip of the tongue" (Burford-Rice & Augoustinos, 2017). Others pass off offensive language as "just a joke" (Grigg & Manderson, 2015).

Does intent matter when assessing racist speech? In one study, interview participants argued that it involves *deliberately* demeaning, insulting, and hateful speech. Recognizing pragmatic rules, this position asserts that a private joke or comment from a close friend might be fine, whereas racist language in an online post in a public forum is never acceptable (Walton et al., 2013).

Rather than focusing on the sender's intent, adopting a receiver orientation grounded in empathy might be a better interpersonal approach (Hangartner et al., 2021). Think about how the target of this speech would regard it. Consider also how third parties might take offense at something you say in person or online. If you're potentially causing harm, why not reword the message using less hurtful language?

A first step in avoiding unintentionally racist language is eliminating potentially offensive labels (Nunberg, 2014). Some troublesome language will be obvious; other problematic uses will be less conspicuous. For instance, racial and ethnic modifiers, such as "black professor" or "Pakistani merchant" can be subtle indicators of racism (as "female doctor" or "male secretary" can imply sexism). If you wouldn't typically use the phrase "white professor," "European American merchant," "male doctor," or "female secretary," then modifiers that spotlight race and sex might suggest attitudes and language that need to be changed.

6.2.5 Precision and Vagueness

Most people assume that the goal of language is to make our ideas clear to one another. When clarity *is* the goal, we need language skills to make our ideas understandable to others. Sometimes, however, we want to be less than perfectly clear. In the following pages, we point out some cases where vagueness serves useful purposes as well as cases where complete understanding is the goal.

Ambiguous Language

Ambiguous language consists of words and phrases that have more than one commonly accepted definition (Trott et al., 2023). Some ambiguous language is amusing, as the following newspaper headlines illustrate:

> Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers
>
> Teacher Strikes Idle Kids
>
> 20-Year Friendship Ends at the Altar

Other misunderstandings involving ambiguous messages can be more serious. A nurse gave one of her patients a scare when she told him that he "wouldn't be needing" his robe, books, and shaving materials anymore. The patient became quiet and moody. When the nurse inquired about the odd behavior, she discovered that the poor man had interpreted her statement to mean he was going to die soon. In fact, the nurse meant he would be going home shortly.

It's difficult to catch and clarify every instance of ambiguous language. For this reason, the responsibility for interpreting statements accurately rests in large part with the receiver. Seeking feedback of one sort or another—for example, by paraphrasing and questioning—can help clear up misunderstandings: "You say you love me, but you want to see other people. In my book, 'love' is exclusive. What about you?"

Abstraction

Abstractions are convenient ways of generalizing about similarities between several objects, people, ideas, or events. Figure 6.1 is an **abstraction ladder** that shows how we can use a range of specific to abstract terms for describing an object, event, or situation.

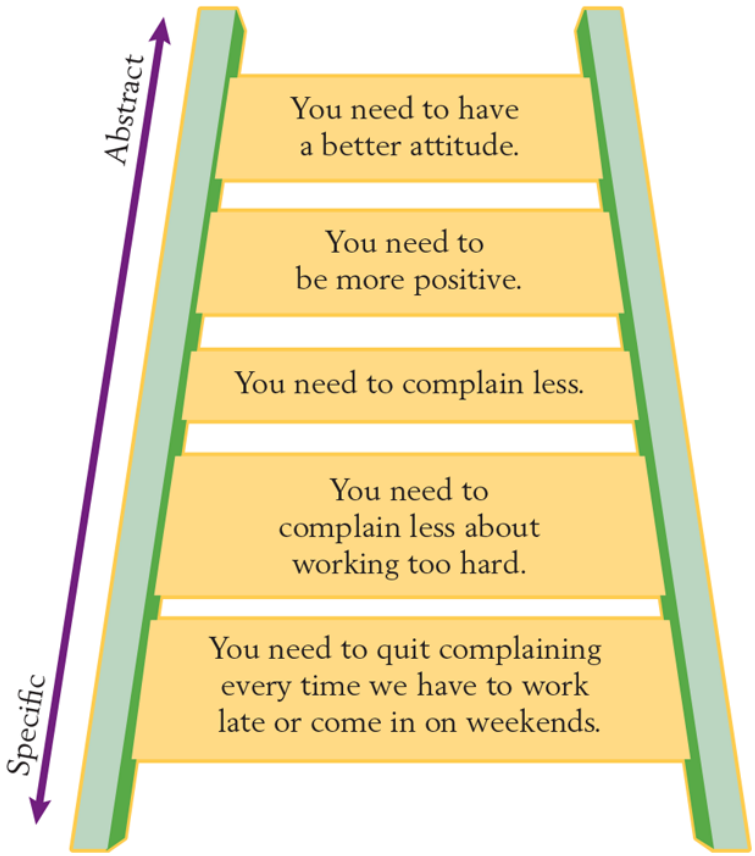

Abstract
Specific
You need to have a better attitude.
You need to be more positive.
You need to complain less.
You need to complain less about working too hard.
You need to quit complaining every time we have to work late or come in on weekends.

FIGURE 6.1 Abstraction Ladder. In this example, a boss gives feedback to an employee about career advancement at various levels of specificity. View larger image

We use higher level abstractions all the time. For instance, rather than saying, “Thanks for washing the dishes, vacuuming the rug, and making the bed,” we might more abstractly say, “Thanks for cleaning up.” In such everyday situations, abstractions can be a useful kind of verbal shorthand.

Vague language can help communicators save face and exhibit politeness (Alkhatnai, 2017). If a friend apologizes for arriving late for a date, you can choose to brush off the incident instead of making it an issue by saying, “Don’t worry. It wasn’t the end of the world”—a true statement but less specific than saying, “To tell you the truth, I was mad at the time, but I’ve cooled off now.” If your boss asks your opinion of a new idea that you think is weaker than your own approach, but you don’t want to disagree, you could

respond with a higher-level abstraction by saying, “I never thought of it that way.”

Although vagueness does have its uses, highly abstract language can cause several types of problems. An email you intended to be professional and polite, for instance, might still be perceived negatively by your boss due its inherent ambiguity and lack of nonverbal cues (Sillars & Zorn, 2021). Even in a face-to-face context, simply telling the hairstylist “shorter” or “more casual” might also lead to an unpleasant surprise. And less-than-precise instructions for cutting, or other procedures, in actual surgery may have even more serious unintended consequences (Liu et al., 2021). Overly abstract language can also lead to stereotyping if, for instance, someone who has had one bad experience blames an entire group: “Marriage counselors are worthless”; “New Yorkers are all rude”; or “Men are no good.” Overly abstract expressions such as these can cause people to think in problematic generalities, ignoring uniqueness.

You might assume that abstract statements will soften the blow of all critical messages, but research suggests that that isn’t always the case. Criticism is rated more favorably when delivered in concrete rather than abstract terms (Moscatelli et al., 2019). Perhaps because they appear to have a hidden agenda, people who describe others’ negative actions in vague terms are rated as less likeable than those who use concrete language (Douglas & Sutton, 2010). Vagueness isn’t appreciated, however, when describing the positive behaviors of others. If you’re going to praise someone, make it as clear and concrete as possible: “Thanks so much for doing the dishes” instead of “It looks better in here.”

You can make your language—and your thinking—less abstract and more clear by learning to form *behavioral descriptions* of your problems, goals, appreciations, complaints, and requests. We use the word *behavioral* because such descriptions move down the abstraction ladder to describe the

specific, observable objects and actions we're thinking about. Table 6.1 shows how behavioral descriptions are much more clear and effective than vague, abstract statements.

TABLE 6.1 Abstract Versus Behavioral Descriptions

	Abstract Description	Behavioral Description			Remarks
		Who Is Involved	In What Circumstances	Specific Behaviors	
Problem	I'm no good at meeting strangers.	People I'd like to date	At parties and in school	I think, "They'd never want to date me." I don't initiate conversations.	Behavioral description more clearly identifies thoughts and behaviors to change.
Goal	I'd like to be more assertive.	Phone and door-to-door solicitors	When I don't want the product or can't afford it	Instead of apologizing, I want to keep saying, "I'm not interested" until they go away.	Behavioral description clearly outlines how to act; abstract description doesn't.
Appreciation	"You've been a great boss."	[no clarification necessary]	When I've needed to change my schedule because of school exams or assignments	"You've been so willing to rearrange my work schedule."	Give both abstract and behavioral descriptions for best results.
Complaint	"I don't like some of the instructors around here."	Professors A and B	In class, when students ask questions the professors think are stupid	They either answer in a sarcastic voice (you might demonstrate) or accuse us	If talking to A or B, use only behavioral descriptions. With others, use both

	Abstract Description	Behavioral Description			Remarks
		Who Is Involved	In What Circumstances	Specific Behaviors	
				of not studying hard enough.	abstract and behavioral descriptions.
Request	"Quit bothering me!"	My friends	When I'm studying for exams	"Instead of asking me again and again to party with you, I wish you'd accept that I need to study tonight."	Behavioral description will reduce defensiveness and make it clear that you don't always want to be left alone.

Watch and Discuss 6.2: "Vague Facebook Posts—Congressional Hearings"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Consider how "vaguebooking" uses *abstract* and *ambiguous language* to achieve its goals.
2. Discuss the pros and cons of being intentionally vague on social media posts.

Euphemism

Euphemisms (from a Greek word meaning "to use words of good omen") are innocuous terms substituted for blunt ones. A euphemism avoids a direct, literal reference to an event (such as "She died"), substituting terms describing its consequences ("She's no longer with us"); related events ("She took her last breath"); metaphors ("She jumped the last hurdle"); or other, more abstract associations (McGlone et al., 2006). Speakers who use euphemisms can promote a more favorable response to a sensitive issue without appearing to resort to deception (Walker et al., 2021). Euphemisms are also used to save face, softening the impact of information that might be unpleasant, both for oneself and for the other person (Lee, 2020). Calling a relationship "challenging" rather than "difficult" appears honest yet less critical, and a relational breakup might be easier to handle with the explanation "I'm not ready for commitment" than with "I want to date other people." (See Activity 3 at the end of this chapter for an ethical challenge about using euphemisms.)

Relative Language

Relative language gains meaning by comparison. For example, do you attend a large or a small school? This depends on what you compare it to. Alongside a campus such as Ohio State, with more than 60,000 students, your school may look small; but compared with a college of 1,500 students, yours may seem quite large. Relative words such as *fast* and *slow*, *near* and *far*, and *short* and *long* are clearly defined only through comparison.

Using relative terms without explaining them can lead to communication problems. Have you ever responded to someone's question about the weather by saying it was warm, only to find out the person thought it was cold? Have you followed a friend's advice and gone to a "cheap" restaurant,

only to find that it was twice as expensive as you expected? Have classes you heard were "easy" turned out to be hard? The problem in each case resulted from failing to link the relative word to a more measurable term.

One way to make words more measurable is to turn them into numbers. Health care practitioners have learned that patients often use vague wording when describing their pain: "It hurts a little"; "I'm pretty sore." The use of a numeric pain scale can give a more precise response—and lead to a better diagnosis (Prentice, 2005). When patients are asked to rank their pain from 1 to 10, with 10 being the most severe pain they've ever experienced, the number 7 is much more concrete and specific than "It aches a bit." The same technique can be used when asking people to rate anything from the movies they've seen to their job satisfaction.

Evaluative Language

Evaluative language (sometimes also called *emotive language*) seems to describe something or someone but really expresses the speaker's attitude, feelings, or judgment (Benamara et al., 2017). If you approve of a friend's roundabout approach to a difficult subject, you might call her "tactful"; if you don't like it, you might accuse her of "beating around the bush."

You can appreciate how evaluative words are really editorial statements when you consider these examples:

If You Approve, Say	If You Disapprove, Say
thrifty	cheap
traditional	old-fashioned
extrovert	loudmouth

cautious	coward
progressive	radical
information	propaganda
eccentric	crazy

World Champion skier Lindsey Vonn (2022) says she was often called "dramatic" about her injuries while a man might have been described as "resilient." She believes the labels influenced how she was perceived. ***Identify evaluative labels that have been used for you.*** View larger image

6.3 The Language of Responsibility

Besides providing a way to make the content of a message clear or obscure, language reflects the speaker's willingness to take responsibility for personal beliefs, feelings, and actions. This acceptance or rejection of responsibility says a great deal about the speaker, and it can shape the tone of a relationship. To see how, read on.

6.3.1 Accountable Language

It's easy to shift responsibility away from yourself through subtle language choices. You can make your statements more accountable by avoiding some uses of "it" and "but."

"It" Statements

Notice the difference between the sentences in each set:

> "It's worrying when you're late."
>
> "I'm worried when you're late."

"It's a bad idea."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"It's a problem."

"I see it as a problem."

As their name implies, **"it" statements** replace the personal pronouns *I* and *me* with the less immediate construction *it's*. By contrast, **"I" language** clearly identifies the speaker as the source of a message (more on "I" language in the next section). Communicators who use "it" statements avoid ownership of a message. This habit isn't just imprecise; it's a subtle, potentially unconscious way for someone to avoid taking a position.

"But" Statements

Statements that take the form "*X*-but-*Y*" can be quite confusing. A closer look at the **"but" statement** explains why. *But* has the effect of canceling the thought that precedes it:

"You're really a great person, but I think we ought to stop seeing each other."

"You've done good work for us, but we're going to have to let you go."

"This paper has some good ideas, but I'm giving it a grade of *D* because it's late."

"Buts" *can* be a face-saving strategy worth using at times. When the goal is to be absolutely clear, however, the most responsible

approach will deliver the central idea without the distractions that can come with "but" statements. Break statements such as the preceding ones into two sentences, or consider replacing "but" with "and." Doing so lets you acknowledge both parts of the statement without contradicting yourself.

6.3.2 "I," "You," and "We" Language

We've already seen that "I" language is a way of accepting responsibility for a message. **"You" language**, by contrast, expresses a judgment of the other person (van Swol et al., 2022). Positive judgments ("You did a great job!") rarely cause problems, but notice how each of the following critical "you" statements imply that the subject of the complaint is doing something wrong:

> "You left this place a mess!"
>
> "You didn't keep your promise!"
>
> "You're really crude sometimes!"

"You" language is likely to arouse defensiveness. It implies that the speaker is qualified to judge the target—not an idea that most listeners are willing to accept. "I" language provides a more accurate and less provocative way to express a complaint (Rogers et al., 2018). By using "I" language, you can describe your reaction to someone's behavior, taking responsibility for your statement without expressing judgment. Communicators who use these kinds of "I" messages

engage in **assertiveness**—clearly expressing their thoughts, feelings, and wants (Alberti & Emmons, 2008).

Assertive messages are composed of three different types of "I" statements. One describes the other person's behavior; one describes your feelings; and one describes the consequences the other's behavior has for you. Here are some examples of complete assertive messages:

> "I get embarrassed [your feeling] when I hear you talk about my poor grades in front of our friends [the behavior you observed]. I'm afraid they'll think I'm stupid [the possible consequence]."
>
> "Because I was waiting for you to pick me up this morning [behavior], I was late for class and wound up getting chewed

> out by the professor [consequences]. That's why I got so angry [feeling]."
>
> "I haven't been very affectionate [consequence] because I've noticed that you've hardly spent any time with me in the past few weeks [behavior]. I'm confused [feeling] about how you feel about me."

When the chances of being misunderstood or getting a defensive reaction are high, it's a good idea to include all three elements in your assertive message. In some cases, however, using only one or two of them will get the job done:

> "I'm feeling annoyed because I went to a lot of trouble fixing this dinner, and now it's cold." [The behavior is obvious.]
>
> "I'm worried because I haven't heard from you." ["Worried" is both a feeling and a consequence in this statement.]

Even the best-constructed and best-delivered "I" message won't always receive a nondefensive response (Bippus & Young, 2005). Furthermore, "I" language in large doses sounds self-centered rather than other-oriented (Cannava et al., 2018). Research shows that self-absorbed people, also known as "conversational narcissists," can be identified by their constant use of first-person singular pronouns (Vangelisti et al., 1990; Zimmermann et al., 2013). For this reason, "I" language works best in moderation.

One way to avoid overuse of "I" language is to consider the pronoun *we*. **"We" language** implies that the issue is the concern and

responsibility of both the speaker and receiver of a message (Karan et al., 2019). Consider a few examples:

> "We have a problem. We can't seem to talk about money without fighting."
>
> "We aren't doing a very good job of keeping the apartment clean, are we?"
>
> "We need to talk to your parents about whether we'll visit them for the holidays."

"We" language can help build a constructive climate. It suggests a kind of "we're in this together" orientation, a component of what is known as *verbal immediacy* (Turman, 2008). Couples who use "we" language are more satisfied and manage conflict better than those who rely more heavily on "I" and "you" pronouns (Wilson et al., 2022). "We-talk" is also helpful for couples when one partner is dealing with a health issue (Lee et al., 2020) or substance use (Hallgren & McCrady, 2016). Using plural pronouns suggests the problem is "ours" rather than "mine" or "yours."

On the other hand, using the pronoun "we" can be presumptuous and even demanding because you are speaking for the other person as well as for yourself (Rentscher et al., 2013). It's easy to imagine someone responding to the statement "*We* have a problem …" by saying, "Maybe *you* have a problem, but don't tell me *I* do!" Look again at the "we" language examples offered previously and imagine that you don't agree with the speaker's conclusions. In that case, you would probably feel defensive rather than included.

As Table 6.2 summarizes, all three pronouns—*I, you*, and *we*—have their advantages and disadvantages. Given this fact, what advice can we give about the most effective pronouns to use in interpersonal communication? One study (Proctor & Wilcox, 1993) offers an answer. The researchers found that college students strongly endorse "I"/"we" combinations (e.g., "I think that we ..." or "I would like to see us ..."), particularly for confrontational conversations in romantic relationships (cf. Sendén et al., 2014). Richard Slatcher and his associates (2008) came to a similar conclusion: There is value in both "I" and "we" messages in relational communication, as these pronouns demonstrate both autonomy and connection (see Section 10.2.2 for a discussion of these relational dialectics).

TABLE 6.2 Pros, Cons, and Recommendations for Using "I," "You," and "We" Language

Pronoun	Pros	Cons	Recommendations
"I" Language	• Takes responsibility for personal thoughts, feelings, and wants. • Less defense provoking than evaluative "you" language.	• Can be perceived as egotistical, narcissistic, and self-absorbed.	• Use descriptive "I" messages in conflicts or confrontations when the other person does not perceive a problem. • Combine "I" with "we" language in conversations.

Pronoun	Pros	Cons	Recommendations
"You" Language	• Signals other-orientation, particularly when the topic is positive or when offering support.	• Can sound evaluative and judgmental, particularly during confrontations.	• Use "you" language when praising or supporting others. • Avoid during confrontations.
"We" Language	• Signals inclusion, immediacy, cohesiveness, and commitment.	• Can speak improperly for others.	• Use in group settings to enhance sense of unity. • Avoid when expressing personal thoughts, feelings, and wants. • Combine with "I" language, particularly in personal conversations.

Because too much of any pronoun comes across as inappropriate, combining them is generally a good idea—and it suggests you're able to see things from multiple perspectives (Pennebaker, 2011). If your "I" language reflects your position without being overly self-absorbed, your "you" language shows concern and support for others

without judging them (see the Focus on Research sidebar in this section), and your "we" language includes others without speaking for them, then your mix of pronouns will probably be close to ideal.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

"You" Language and Interpersonal Support

What's the best way to support others when they share their problems? A team of communication scholars aimed to find out by examining the language of endorsing, "person-centered" messages. They discovered that part of the answer resides in pronouns.

The researchers analyzed transcripts of 343 conversations by counting the frequency of particular words. They learned that supportive messages were high in second-person pronouns (*you*, *your*) and low in first-person pronouns (*I*, *my*). In these cases, "you" language was deemed more other-oriented than "I" language. They also found that supportive communication was characterized by emotion words that reflected the problem-holder's feelings—particularly negative ones (*sad*, *angry*, *hurt*). According to their analysis, an ideal supportive response to someone's troubles would be, "Sounds like *you* are *upset* and *frustrated* about what happened."

The researchers are quick to point out that counting words doesn't tell the whole story. The phrase "You shouldn't be so sad" uses "you" language and an emotion word, but it hardly qualifies as a supportive message. This serves as a reminder that there are no magic words or formulas for saying the right

thing. But as a guideline, communicators offering support do well to keep the focus on others rather than on themselves.

Cannava, K. E., High, A. C., Jones, S. M., & Bodie, G. D. (2018). The stuff that verbal person-centered support is made of: Identifying linguistic markers of more and less supportive conversations. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 37*, 656–679. See also Zhou, Y., & High, A. C. (2023). Language use in online support provision: The impact of others' supportive messages, support-seeking strategy, and channel publicness. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 28,* zmac038.

6.3.3 The Language of Choice

The words that follow pronouns are also important ingredients in responsible communication (Zeman, 2010). Read the following statements and consider how you feel about them (assume they involve activities you'd rather not do):

> "I *have to* talk to my neighbor about the barking dog."
>
> "I *should* be nicer to my roommate."
>
> "I *ought to* be more assertive."
>
> "I *can't* take this anymore."
>
> "I had *no choice*—I *had to* tell her."

It's likely you read those lines in a somber tone of voice, and you were left with a sense of heaviness and pressure. Consider how those same phrases might conjure a different feeling if worded this way (with possible reasons in parentheses):

> "I'm going to talk to my neighbor about the barking dog" (I want to settle this problem).
>
> "I will start being nicer to my roommate" (I want a more pleasant relationship).
>
> "I'm determined to be more assertive" (I want to be a more effective communicator).
>
> "I'm not going to take this anymore" (I want change).
>
> "I decided to tell her" (I wanted her to know).

Notice how this list describes *choices* instead of *obligations*. The wording focuses on decisions made (e.g., *will*, *going to*), not grudging acquiescence (e.g., *should*, *have to*). You probably found the second list more motivating than the first, and research supports this notion. When participants in one study said, "I *don't* eat unhealthy snacks" (suggesting personal choice) instead of "I *can't* eat unhealthy snacks" (suggesting external constraint), they had greater willpower and changes in their eating habits (Patrick & Hagtvedt, 2012). The researchers call this "empowered refusal" and maintain that word choice plays a significant role in the process.

Harvard psychologist Susan David (2016) maintains that labeling a goal as a "have to" (as in "I have to finish this paper") increases emotional stress and decreases the likelihood of achieving that goal. However, turning that "have to" into a "want to" facilitates goal achievement: "I want to finish this paper because I want to do well in this course, and I also want to enjoy the rest of the weekend." She notes that rewording goals is often an important component in perceiving them differently:

> We all fall into these subtle traps of language and thinking: "I *have to* be on dad duty today," or "I *have to* attend another boring meeting." When we do this, we forget that our current circumstances are often the result of earlier choices we made in service of our values: "I *want to* be a father," or "I love the work that I do and *want to* excel at my job."

Once you've adopted the language of choice for yourself, consider what it's like to offer that same choice and freedom to others:

"You should"	becomes	"I'm going to" (and you can join me if you want)
"You have to"	becomes	"You're welcome to"
"We can't"	becomes	"I don't want to" (do you?)

One study found that when a request is followed by the phrase "but you are free to say no," respondents are actually more likely to comply with the request (Carpenter, 2013). The concept is simple: People don't like feeling pressured or having their options limited or prescribed. When you extend the right of refusal, others are more open to respond favorably. Of course, it's best when the phrase "but you are free" isn't just a technique to get others to say yes. The goal is to genuinely offer freedom of choice, which people value and appreciate. (See Activity 4 at the end of this chapter for a skill builder about the language of responsibility.)

6.4 Gender and Language

So far we have discussed language usage as if it were identical for women and men. Are there differences, though? If so, how important are they?

6.4.1 Extent of Gender Differences

Some people believe that men and women communicate in significantly different ways, whereas others find far more similarities than differences. We outline two approaches that represent two sides in the gender and language debate.

Approach 1: Significant Differences

In 1992, John Gray argued that men and women are so fundamentally different that they might as well have come from separate planets. In his best-selling book, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, he claimed that men and women think, feel, and communicate very differently. Based largely on anecdotes and conjecture, Gray's work lacks scholarly support. Nevertheless, social scientists acknowledge certain significant differences in the ways men and women behave socially (Palomares, 2008; Wood &

Fixmer-Oraiz, 2017). Some scholars, most notably sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1994, 2001, 2017), contend that these behaviors create distinct cultures with different "genderlects." Tannen is well known for contrasting the task-oriented *report* talk of men with the relationship-oriented *rapport* talk of women.

Communication researcher Anthony Mulac (2006, see also Mulac et al., 2013) finds that men are more likely than women to speak in sentence fragments ("Nice photo."), use more judgmental language, and make more directive statements. Mulac's research indicates that women's speech is more tentative, elaborate, and emotional. For instance, their sentences are typically longer than men's. Women also refer more to feelings and use intensive adverbs ("He's *really* interested") that paint a more complete verbal picture. In addition, women's speech is often less assertive (Abisaid & Li, 2020; Manian & Sheth, 2021). It contains more statements of uncertainty ("It seems to be ..."), hedges ("We're *kind of* set in our ways."), and tag questions ("Do you think so?"). A study of college students found men speak out without raising hands and interrupt more than women, and they engage in longer conversations during class (Lee & Mccabe, 2021).

Research shows that men and women have different written language styles (Pennebaker, 2011), which shows up in online communication (Hosseini & Tammimy, 2016). In one study, researchers analyzed more than 15 million Facebook status updates from approximately 75,000 women and men and found marked differences in their language use (Schwartz et al., 2013). Women used more emotion words ("excited"; "wonderful") and first-person

singular pronouns, and they made more references to the people in their lives. Men made more object references (“game”; “government”; “Xbox”) and swore far more often—a finding that seems to hold true across every study conducted about gender and language. Another study of over 15,000 Facebook users revealed substantial gender differences in affiliative speech (Park et al., 2016). The language of women was warmer, more compassionate, and more polite than that of men, whose language was cooler and more impersonal.

Communication scholar Julia Wood has devoted much of her career to analyzing the impact of sex and gender on communication. Rather than discussing distinct cultures, she describes masculine and

feminine speech communities whose members have been socialized to share communication goals, strategies, and methods of interpretation (Wood & Fixmer-Oraiz, 2017). This gendered socialization stems from childhood games segregated by sex and structured by different rules about how to speak and act. Girls typically play in smaller groups where talk is the central activity. A game like house, for example, lacks a rulebook, making prosocial cooperation and conversation among players essential for success. In contrast, a game like football occurs in a larger group with predetermined roles and competitive goals, making verbal communication less important. The rules girls and boys learn at play often inform the different feminine and masculine communication practices of adults (see Table 6.3).

TABLE 6.3 Differences in Feminine and Masculine Communication Practices

Feminine	Masculine
Converse to maintain relationships	Converse to establish control
Create a climate of equality	Create a sense of power and status
Offer emotional support	Solve tasks and problems
Ask questions	Make statements
Offer concrete personal disclosures	Make abstract generalizations
Speak tentatively (often to be polite)	Speak assertively (often to be in charge)

Adapted from Wood, J. T., & Fixmer-Oraiz, N. (2017). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, & culture* (12th ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage.

Approach 2: Minor Differences

Despite the differences in the way men and women speak, the link between gender and language use isn't as clear-cut as it might seem (Baker, 2014; Timmerman, 2002). One meta-analysis involving more than 3,000 participants found that women were only slightly more likely than men to use tentative speech (Leaper & Robnett, 2011). Three other analyses (Leaper & Ayres, 2007) looked for gender differences in adults' talkativeness, affiliative speech, and assertive speech—and found negligible differences for all three language constructs.

A study that asked men and women to describe a health-related episode offers further support for the "minor differences" approach (Hancock et al., 2015). Analysis of the transcripts revealed that women used slightly more intense adverbs and personal pronouns than men did. However, participants who read the transcripts were largely unable to identify the speaker's gender. The same researchers then asked cisgender men, cisgender women, and transgender women to describe a painting. Studied closely, the transgender women's word choices were slightly more similar to men's than to women's—but again, most people could not distinguish between them on the basis of word choice.

In light of the considerable similarities in language use across gender, communication researcher Kathryn Dindia (2006) suggests that the "men are from Mars, women are from Venus" claim should be replaced by the metaphor that "men are from North Dakota, women are from South Dakota."

6.4.2 Non-Gender Influences on Language Use

Gender isn't the only factor that influences how women and men use language. Other variables can outweigh, mitigate, or interact with a speaker's gender when it comes to language use. Conversation topics are important. Women speak more tentatively than men in intergroup situations about subjects considered masculine, such as sports and cars, and men speak more tentatively in intergroup contexts about subjects considered feminine, such as shopping (Ma & Seate, 2017).

Setting also has an impact. When the language of men and women is compared in similar contexts such as the home or workplace, differences are only slightly larger than comparisons of same-sex groups (Baker, 2014). Other research has examined specific occupations. Female farm operators, working in a male-dominated world, reproduce the masculinity that spells success for their male counterparts, swearing and talking "tough as nails" (Pilgeram, 2007). Nurses who are women use similar language to those who are men (McDowell, 2015), as is true for managers (Mullany, 2011) and athletes (Sullivan, 2004). A study of female tennis players found their speech to be professional and efficient rather than conventionally feminine or masculine (Sznycer, 2013).

Another factor that can outweigh gender is power. For instance, in gay and lesbian relationships, the conversational styles of partners are more strongly linked to power differences in the relationship

(e.g., who is earning more money) than to gender (Steen & Schwartz, 1995). Even in engineering, an occupation dominated by men, the communication style of women and men is determined primarily by context and co-constructed norms of their professional community rather than gender norms (Angouri, 2011). Findings like these suggest that characteristically feminine or masculine speech has been less a function of gender or sex than context or social power historically. In fact, differences in social status often show up more clearly in language than gender differences do (Pennebaker, 2011).

What, then, is the verdict on gender's effects on language? The simple answer is that there are some differences between male and female language patterns. However, those distinctions may not be as significant as some claim—and they might occur for reasons other than the gender or sex of the communicator.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Communication in Transition

When transgender individuals shift their gender expressions, do their communication patterns change as well? Katherine Murray conducted in-depth interviews with trans men and learned that after transitioning, the men did indeed make small but important changes in the way they talked. Here are a few of the communication adjustments the participants identified:

- *Asserting themselves:* All the men in this study said that since transitioning they have become more likely to

assert their opinions in conversation. "As a girl you don't want to come off as bossy or pushy," said one participant. "Being a guy, your threshold for coming off as a jerk is a lot higher."

- *Challenging others:* In a similar vein, most of the participants reported a greater willingness to challenge others in conversation since beginning to present as men. One said that he's "not as likely to back down" in conflict discussions. Another reported he's begun using more "verbal jabs" while poking fun at other guys in conversation.
- *Making requests:* Some participants said they make fewer requests as men than they did when they presented as women. Two used the same words to describe how they viewed asking for help from others: an "admittance of defeat." Others said they continued making requests and did so politely, not wanting to take advantage of their newfound privilege as a man.

All the men made changes to their paralanguage (see Section 7.4.3) since transitioning. Not only did they lower their pitch, but most now use speech styles they described as "monotone" or "flat." Murray concludes that these changes in language and vocal patterns among the men in this study demonstrate that "beliefs about gendered language and expectations for men and women's communication styles permeate society and influence how people communicate."

Murray, K. (2016). "I grew up knowing how to talk female": Transgender men's reported communicative changes in their post-transition lives. *Texas Linguistics*

Forum, 59, 79–89.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 6.1 **Explain the symbolic, rule-based, subjective, culture-bound nature of language.**

Language is both a marvelous communication tool and the source of many interpersonal problems. Every language is a collection of symbols governed by a variety of rules. Because of its symbolic nature, language is not a precise vehicle; its meanings rest in people, not in words themselves. Finally, the very language we speak can shape our worldview.

Q: Describe how a recent, important communicative exchange from your life illustrates the symbolic, rule-based, subjective, culture-bound nature of language.

Objective 6.2 **Recognize the impact, both positive and negative, of language in interpersonal relationships.**

Language both reflects and shapes the perceptions of its users. For example, names that people are given can influence their identity and the way they are viewed by others. Language also reflects the level of affiliation communicators have with each other. And language patterns reflect and shape a speaker's perceived power. Finally, language can reflect and influence sexist and racist attitudes.

When used carelessly, language can lead to a variety of interpersonal problems. The level of precision or vagueness of messages can affect a receiver's understanding of them. Both precise messages and vague, evasive messages have their uses in interpersonal relationships; and a competent communicator has the ability to choose the optimal level of precision for the situation at hand. Competent communicators also know how to use "I," "you," and "we" statements to accept the optimal level of responsibility and relational harmony.

Q: Analyze your language use over two days to identify both how it facilitates relationships and how it creates interpersonal problems.

Objective 6.3 **Use language that reflects responsibility for thoughts and actions.**

Using the pronoun "I" (sometimes instead of *it*) demonstrates responsibility for the message. By contrast, evaluative "You" language is likely to provoke defensiveness. "We" language can signal solidarity, but it can also speak improperly for others. Words that describe choice (*want to*, *going to*, *will*) instead of obligation (*have to*, *should*, *can't*) demonstrate a sense of agency, both for you and others. Removing *but* (as in *X*-but-*Y*) or replacing it with *and* accepts accountability for both parts of the statement.

Q: As a proxy for your spoken words, examine a representative sample of your written messages to see

how well they reflect taking responsibility for your thoughts and actions.

Objective 6.4 **Describe the influence gender has on language use in interpersonal relationships.**

The relationship between gender and language is a complex one. Although some writers in the popular press have argued that men and women speak in radically different ways, this position isn't supported by scholarship. A growing body of research suggests that the differences that do exist are relatively minor in light of the gender similarities. Many of the language differences that first appear to be sex-related may actually be due to other factors such as occupation and interpersonal power.

Q: Identify similarities and differences in language used by men and women, and provide explanations for such differences.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Reflection:** The section on Naming and Identity (6.2.1) notes that "A person's name can be a point of pride or a source of shame." Reflect on times when you've felt either pride or shame—or both—about your name. To what degree do you equate your name with your identity? Would you ever want to change your name—and if so, to what and why?
2. **Self-Appraisal:** Review the section on Power and Politeness (6.2.3) and then answer this question: In general, do you think your language patterns need to be more powerful or more polite? Offer specific examples of how you might change your speech to achieve your goals. Then share your appraisal with a trusted friend or loved one and get that person's feedback.
3. **Ethical Challenge:** Some people regard euphemisms (Section 6.2.5) as face-saving ways to soften the impact of unpleasant information (e.g., "She passed away" vs. "She died"). Others regard euphemisms as imprecise and even confusing ("If you're firing me, just say so"). What do you believe is your ethical obligation regarding precision and vagueness? Offer examples of how being

precise or being vague can help or hurt your interpersonal communication.

4. **Build Your Skill:** Practice rephrasing each of the following "you" statements in "I" and/or "we" language (Section 6.3.2):

    "You're not telling me the truth!"

    "You only think of yourself!"

    "You don't understand a word I'm saying!"

Now think of three evaluative "you" messages you could make to people in your life. Transform each of these into more responsible expressions of your thoughts, feelings, and wants. In your rephrasings, try to use behavioral descriptions (Table 6.1) and the language of choice (Section 6.3.3). Here's an example:

> "You're so rude to my friends. You have to be nicer."
>
> "I was embarrassed last night when you walked away from my friends mid-conversation. It would mean a lot to me if you would say, 'Excuse me' before leaving the room."

Assessing Your Communication: Sexist Language (Personal Practice)

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

- abstraction ladder
- Ambiguous language
- assertiveness
- “but” statement
- Convergence
- divergence
- Euphemisms
- Evaluative language
- “I” language
- “it” statements
- linguistic relativity
- Phonological rules
- politeness
- powerful language
- powerless language
- pragmatic rules
- Racist language

Relative language

Sapir–Whorf hypothesis

Semantic rules

Sexist language

syntactic rules

"We" language

"You" language

CHAPTER 6 Flashcards

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

7
Nonverbal Communication

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **7.1** Define nonverbal communication.
- **7.2** Describe the distinguishing characteristics of nonverbal communication.
- **7.3** Identify and offer examples of the various functions that nonverbal communication can serve.

7.4 Describe how meaning is communicated through particular nonverbal cues.

TAKE ANOTHER LOOK at the photo that opens this chapter. What does the woman's facial expression say? Her attire? The hand signal she's flashing? If you ask a dozen people, you're likely to get almost as many interpretations, any of which could be valid—or totally off.

This experiment offers a preview of this chapter's topic. You've probably seen claims that by reading "body language" you can discover other people's deepest secrets, and that mastering it will transform you from bumbling to successful. Such claims are almost always exaggerations. There *is* a scientific body of knowledge about nonverbal communication, and it *has* provided many fascinating and valuable clues to human behavior. That's what this chapter is about. It's unlikely that the next few pages will turn you into a clairvoyant who can read others like a book, but don't go away. Even without glamorous promises, a quick look at some facts about nonverbal communication shows that it's an important and valuable field to study—and that nonverbal skills are worth acquiring (Patterson et al., 2021).

7.1 Nonverbal Communication Defined

If *non* means "not" and *verbal* means "with words," then it seems logical that *nonverbal communication* would involve "communication without words." This definition is an oversimplification, however, because it fails to distinguish between *vocal* communication (with the voice) and *verbal* communication (with words). Some nonverbal messages have a vocal element. For example, the words "I love you" have different meanings depending on the way they are spoken. Furthermore, some non-spoken forms of communication, including sign languages used in the Deaf community, are actually linguistic and not really nonverbal in the sense that most social scientists use the term. Therefore, a better definition of **nonverbal communication** is "messages expressed by nonlinguistic means."

These nonlinguistic messages are important because what people *do* often conveys more meaning than what they *say*. One early study (Mehrabian, 1972) claimed that 93 percent of the emotional impact of a message comes from a nonverbal source, whereas only a paltry 7 percent is verbal. Later research indicates that the nonverbal influence in interpersonal communication is closer to 60 to 65 percent (Burgoon et al., 2009). Although social scientists have disputed these figures and the relative importance of verbal versus

nonverbal cues (Jackob et al., 2016), the point remains: Nonverbal communication significantly shapes interpersonal perceptions.

You might ask how nonverbal communication can be so powerful. To answer this question, recall a time when you observed speakers of an unfamiliar language communicating. Although you couldn't understand the words being spoken, there were likely plenty of clues to what was going on in the exchange. By tuning in to facial expressions, postures, gestures, vocal tones, and other behaviors, you probably gained a sense of the communicators' relationship and even their individual personalities (Breil et al., 2021). Researchers (summarized in Knapp et al., 2013) have found that subjects who hear content-free speech—ordinary speech that has been electronically manipulated so that the words are unintelligible—can consistently recognize the emotion being expressed and identify its strength.

7.2 Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication

As Table 7.1 shows, verbal and nonverbal communication differ in a number of important ways. We now take a look at five characteristics of nonverbal communication.

TABLE 7.1 Some Differences Between Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Verbal Communication	Nonverbal Communication
• Mostly voluntary and conscious	• Often unconscious
• Usually content oriented	• Usually relational
• Can be clear or vague	• Inherently ambiguous
• Primarily shaped by culture	• Rooted in biology
• Discontinuous/intermittent	• Continuous
• Single channel (words only)	• Multichannel

7.2.1 Nonverbal Communication Is Always Occurring

Some theorists suggest that *all* nonverbal behavior communicates information. They argue that it is impossible *not* to communicate. You can understand the impossibility of non-communication by considering what you would do if someone told you not to communicate any messages at all. Even if you closed your eyes or left the room, these behaviors would communicate messages that mean you're avoiding contact. One study (DePaulo, 1992) took just this approach. When communicators were told not to express nonverbal clues, others viewed them as dull, withdrawn, uneasy, aloof, and deceptive. Even broadcast journalists trained to keep their reporting neutral have a hard time concealing nonverbal displays of emotion (Deavours, 2020).

The impossibility of not communicating is significant because it means that each of us is a kind of transmitter that cannot be shut off. No matter what you do, you send out messages that say something about yourself and your relationships with others. If, for instance, others were observing you now, what nonverbal clues would they get about how you're feeling? Are you sitting forward or reclining? Is your posture tense or relaxed? What does your facial expression communicate now? Can you make your face expressionless? Don't people with expressionless faces communicate something to you? Even uncontrollable behaviors can convey a message. You may not intend to show that you're embarrassed, but your blushing can still be a giveaway.

Of course, not all behaviors (intentional or not) will be interpreted correctly: Your trembling hands might be taken as a sign of nervousness when you're really just shivering from the cold. But whether or not your behavior is intentional, and whether or not it is interpreted accurately, all nonverbal behavior has the potential to create messages.

7.2.2 Nonverbal Communication Is Primarily Relational

Some nonverbal messages serve practical functions, such as when a police officer directs the flow of traffic. But nonverbal

communication also serves in a far more common (and more interesting) series of *social* functions.

Nonverbal communication allows us to demonstrate the kind of relationships we have—or want to have—with others (Burgoon et al., 2021). You can appreciate this fact by thinking about the wide range of ways you could behave when greeting another person. You could wave, shake hands, nod, smile, clap the other person on the back, give a hug, or avoid all contact. Each one of these behaviors sends a message about the nature of your relationship with the other person (Bertsch et al., 2020).

Nonverbal messages perform another valuable social function: They convey emotions that you may be unwilling or unable to express, or ones you may not even be aware of. In fact, nonverbal communication is much better suited to expressing attitudes and feelings than it is ideas. You can prove this for yourself by imagining how you could express each item on the following list nonverbally:

1. "I'm tired."
2. "I'm in favor of capital punishment."
3. "I'm attracted to another person in the group."
4. "I think school prayer should be allowed."
5. "I'm angry at someone in this room."

This experience shows that, short of charades, ideas (such as statements 2 and 4) don't lend themselves to nonverbal expressions nearly as well as attitudes and feelings (statements 1, 3, and 5). This

explains why it's possible to understand the attitudes or feelings of others by reading nonverbal cues, even if you aren't able to understand the subject of their communication.

7.2.3 Nonverbal Communication Is Ambiguous

Chapter 6 pointed out how some language can be ambiguous. (For example, the statement "That nose piercing really makes you stand out" could be a compliment or a criticism; and the vague statement "I'm almost done" could mean you have to wait a few minutes or an hour.) Most nonverbal behavior has the potential to be even more ambiguous than verbal statements such as these. To understand why, consider how you would interpret silence from your companion during an evening together. Think of all the possible meanings of this nonverbal behavior: warmth, anger, preoccupation, boredom, nervousness, thoughtfulness—the possibilities are many.

A supermarket chain inadvertently illustrated the ambiguity of nonverbal behavior when it instructed employees to smile and make eye contact with customers. Unfortunately, some customers mistook the service-with-a-smile approach as a sign of romantic interest (Grimsley, 1998). As this story suggests, nonverbal cues are much more ambiguous than verbal statements when it comes to expressing physical attraction (LaFrance, 2010).

Because nonverbal behavior is so ambiguous, caution is wise when you are responding to nonverbal cues. Rather than jumping to

conclusions about the meaning of a sigh, smile, slammed door, or yawn, it's far better to use the kind of perception-checking approach described in Chapter 5. "When you yawned, I thought I was boring you. But maybe you're just tired. What's going on?" Considering more than one possible interpretation for nonverbal behavior is an element of communication competence. Popular advice on the subject notwithstanding, it's usually not possible to read a person like a book.

7.2.4 Nonverbal Communication Occurs Even in Mediated Messages

Not all mediated communication is verbal. Video calls obviously provide nonverbal information, as do photos on social networking sites. Even text-based digital communication has nonverbal features.

One obvious way to represent nonverbal expressions is with emojis. People and even bots become more socially attractive, competent, and credible when they enhance verbal messages with emojis (Beattie et al., 2020). This varies with context, however (Cavalheiro et al., 2022). Emoji use is seen as more appropriate in closer rather than distant relationships (e.g., a friend versus a bank manager) and in positive rather than negative messages (e.g., praise versus criticism).

These types of images can sometimes add important nuance that isn't evident from words alone (Nauert, 2017). Sarcasm, for example, is easier for older adults to perceive when accompanied by a winking

emoji (Garcia et al., 2022). Consider how different emojis might create a different meaning for the same statement.

- You are driving me crazy
- You are driving me crazy
- You are driving me crazy

Be aware, however, that while emojis can reduce ambiguity, they can also increase it (Częstochowska et al., 2022). A smiley face, just like an actual smile, could mean "I'm really happy," "I'm only kidding," or even ironically "I'm not happy."

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

The Power of Periods. In Texting.

It's Saturday night, and you text your friends to see if they want to get together. You get some affirmative emojis in response. Others use positive words such as "Okay," "Yeah," and "Yup" without punctuation—but a few end their one-word responses with a period: "Sure."

Does the punctuation make a difference in how you perceive the message? Based on their findings, Professor Danielle Gunraj and her colleagues would answer "Yes." The researchers showed 126 undergraduates a series of question–answer exchanges similar to the one just described. Some were framed

as text messages; others as handwritten notes. When the one-word text responses were followed by a period, the students viewed them as less sincere than those without punctuation. It's worth noting that the presence of a period didn't make a difference in the handwritten exchanges, suggesting that this is a phenomenon unique to texting.

Although the study was modest, it got a lot of press and follow-up analysis. Linguist John McWhorter sees texting as akin to casual speaking (Harrison-Caldwell, 2021). Skipping periods suggests a texter is relaxed and comfortable, whereas concluding sentences with a full-stop seems overly formal, distant, or even passive-aggressive to a younger generation. One Gen Z employee reported receiving a comment from a colleague saying "good job." But the period made her second guess whether she was being praised. "I'm like, 'Is it a good job?'" she said. "It just makes me nervous" (Abril, 2022).

Perhaps that's reading a lot into a tiny dot. But that's the nature of nonverbal communication: It's ambiguous, relational, and sometimes more significant than the words it accompanies.

Gunraj, D. N., Drumm-Hewitt, A. M., Dashow, E. M., Upadhyay, S. S. N., & Kline, C. M. (2016). Texting insincerely: The role of the period in text messages. *Computers in Human Behavior, 55*, 1067–1075.

Other online communication markers are also ambiguous (McCulloch, 2019). Exclamation marks (sometimes more than one!!!) can denote a variety of emotional states including excitement, agitation, and anger. Multiple exclamation or question marks can make the writer appear less competent in workplace messages (Sidi

et al., 2021), so it's best to save them for personal exchanges. Ellipses (…) at the end of a phrase can signal displeasure, thoughtfulness, or confusion. They can also be turn-taking signals, similar to what you might convey facially or with pauses during in-person conversations. The same is true of "lexical surrogates" such as "hmmm" or "ooooh," with meanings ranging from delight to disapproval. Even clicking "Like" or "+1" has a variety of content and relational meanings (Hayes et al., 2016). The Focus on Research sidebar in this section describes the potential impact of a simple period at the end of a text message.

7.2.5 Nonverbal Communication Is Influenced by Culture and Gender

Cultures differ in their nonverbal languages as well as their verbal ones (Dutton & Lyons, 2021). Fiorello La Guardia, legendary mayor of New York from 1933 to 1945, was fluent in English, Italian, and Yiddish. Watching films of his campaign speeches with no sound, researchers found they could tell the language La Guardia was speaking based solely on the changes in his nonverbal behavior (Birdwhistell, 1970).

Some nonverbal behaviors—called **emblems**—are culturally understood substitutes for verbal expressions (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). Nodding the head up and down is an accepted way of saying "yes" in most cultures. Likewise, a side-to-side head shake is a nonverbal way of saying "no," and a shrug of the shoulders is

commonly understood as meaning “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure.” Remember, however, that some emblems—such as the thumbs-up gesture—vary from one culture to another. It means “Good job!” in the United States, the number 1 in Germany, and a crude insult in Iran and Iraq. Most Americans would say the hand gesture in the statue photo in this section means “Okay.” But to a Buddhist it signifies acceptance of the world as it is, and in Greece and Turkey its meaning is vulgar.

Culture also affects how nonverbal cues are monitored. In Japan, for instance, people tend to look to the eyes for emotional cues, whereas

Americans and Europeans focus on the mouth (Yuki et al., 2007). Consistent with these tendencies, Japanese participants in one study were more adept than Americans at recognizing happiness in people wearing masks (Saito et al., 2022). These differences can be seen in the text-based emoticons (Park et al., 2014) and emojis used in these cultures (Gao & Vanderlaan, 2020). Western pictorials focus on mouth expressions, while Eastern ones feature the eyes.

A variety of cultural norms guide nonverbal expressiveness (Yoshie & Sauter, 2020). In some cultures, overt demonstrations of feelings such as happiness or anger are discouraged. In other cultures, the same expressions are perfectly appropriate. Thus, a Korean person might appear much more nonverbally controlled than an Italian person, when in fact their feelings might be identical. It's important to note that the *culture* in which people live is far more important than their *nationality* or *ethnicity*. For example, the facial expressions of Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans differ in ways that reflect their cultural backgrounds (Marsh et al., 2003). Similarly, Australians are able to distinguish between Asian Australians adopted as babies and Asian nationals based on nonverbals such as facial expressions and hairstyles (Alcott & Watt, 2021). See Chapter 3 for more discussion of the impact of culture on nonverbal communication.

HEY.
HI!!!
I THINK I'LL JUST STAY HOME TONIGHT. SARA IS REALLY TIRED.
HOW CAN YOU TELL?
SHE'S DOWN TO THREE EXCLAMATION POINTS.
SCOTT AND BORGMAN

Gender also influences nonverbal communication—and with rare exceptions, differences hold true across cultures (Knapp et al., 2013). In general, women are more accurate than men in interpreting others' nonverbal behavior (Fernández-Abascal et al., 2019). They are also more nonverbally expressive. More specifically, research summarized by Judith Hall (2006b) shows that, compared to men, women typically

- Smile more
- Use more facial expression
- Use more (but less expansive) head, hand, and arm gestures
- Touch others more
- Stand closer to others
- Are more vocally expressive
- Make more eye contact

These distinctions also occur in online communication where, for instance, women tend to use more emojis (Jones et al., 2020) and exclamation marks (Waseleski, 2006) than men. Despite these

differences, men's and women's nonverbal communication patterns have a good deal in common (Dindia, 2006; Hall, 2006a). Moreover, male–female nonverbal differences are less pronounced in conversations between gay and lesbian participants (Knöfler & Imhof, 2007). Gender and culture certainly have an influence on nonverbal style, but the differences are often a matter of degree rather than kind. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for a reflection on gender and nonverbal communication.)

7.3 Functions of Nonverbal Communication

Now that you have a better understanding of what nonverbal communication is, we need to explore the functions it serves in relationships. As you'll read, nonverbal cues play several important roles in the way you relate with other (Ting-Toomey, 2017).

7.3.1 Creating and Maintaining Relationships

Communication is our primary means of beginning, maintaining, and ending relationships, topics we examine closely in Chapter 10. Nonverbal behavior plays an important role during every relational stage.

Consider the importance of nonverbal communication at the beginning of a relationship. When you first meet other people, an initial goal is to reduce uncertainty about them (Berger, 2011). You ask yourself questions such as "Would I like to know them better?" and "Are they interested in me?" One of the first ways to answer these questions is by observing nonverbal cues, including facial expression, eye contact, posture, gesture, and tone of voice (Deyo et

al., 2011). This process occurs quite rapidly. Researchers have found that a single glance at a person's face for just 33 to 100 milliseconds is enough to form a first impression (South Palomares & Young, 2018).

At the same time you're analyzing others, you're providing nonverbal cues about your attitude toward them. It's rare to share these thoughts and feelings overtly. Imagine how odd it would be to say or hear "I'm friendly and relaxed" or "You look pretty interesting, but I won't pursue this unless you give me a sign that you're interested too." Messages like these are much more safely expressed via nonverbal channels. Of course, it's important to remember that nonverbal cues are ambiguous and that you may be misinterpreting them (Neta et al., 2021). You might want to get an outside evaluation to check your perceptions ("Is it my imagination or is she checking me out?").

In the TV series *Abbott Elementary*, characters like Janine Teagues (Quinta Brunson) often reveal their attitudes toward others through knowing glances at the camera. ***How important is monitoring your nonverbal reactions to others? Provide examples of how this might vary with context.*** View larger image

Nonverbal cues are also important in established, ongoing relationships: They both help create and signal the emotional climate. For example, nonverbal displays of affection—such as sitting close, holding hands, winking, and gazing—are strongly connected to satisfaction and commitment in romantic relationships (Faure et al., 2018). Here's a fun fact: Kisses delivered with a rightward head turn generally signal romance, while leftward kisses are typical of non-romantic relationships (Sedgewick et al., 2019). In families, nonverbal cues offer a clear sign of relational satisfaction (Rogers, 2001), and managing their meaning is vital to successful parent–child interaction (Grebelsky-Lichtman & Shenker, 2019). On the job, encouraging eye contact and facial expressions of supervisors can enhance emotional contagion with subordinates (Jia & Cheng, 2021). Not surprisingly, supportive nonverbals are especially important for managers giving critical feedback (Seppälä, 2017).

You can test the power of nonverbal behavior in relationships for yourself. First, observe the interaction of people in relationships without paying attention to their words. Watch couples or families in restaurants or other public places. Focus on the nonverbal behavior of fellow employees or professors and their students. You are likely to see a multitude of cues that suggest the quality of each relationship. Chances are good that you could make educated guesses about whether the people you're watching are satisfied with

each other—and whether their relationship is beginning, being maintained, or ending.

7.3.2 Regulating Interaction

Nonverbal **regulators** are cues that help control verbal interaction. One example of such regulation is the wide array of turn-taking signals in everyday conversation (Wiemann & Knapp, 2008). Three signals that indicate that a speaker has finished talking and is ready to yield to a listener are (1) changes in vocal intonation—a rising or falling in pitch at the end of a clause, (2) a drawl on the last syllable or the stressed syllable in a clause, and (3) a drop in vocal pitch or loudness when speaking a common expression such as "you know."

Eye contact is another way of regulating verbal communication (Wohltjen & Wheatley, 2021). In conversations, the person listening typically looks more at the speaker than the reverse. When speakers seek a response, they signal by looking at the listener, creating a brief period of mutual gaze called a "gaze window." At this point, the listener is likely to respond with a nod, "uh-huh," or other reaction, after which the speaker looks away and continues speaking.

There are other ways to regulate interaction nonverbally—consciously or not. If you check the time on your phone or a nearby clock while someone is talking, that person will most likely talk faster to regain your attention, or perhaps stop and ask, "Do you need to get going?" Shifting your body weight uneasily or jangling the keys in your pocket might achieve the same effect. Consider how your

furrowed brow, pursed lips, or head tilt might alter the communication of someone who is talking to you.

"Wow, I can't believe it's already time for you guys to pick up on social cues that we'd like you to leave."

7.3.3 Influencing Others

How you look, act, and sound can be more important than the words you speak. The influence of nonverbal behavior comes in many forms. It can capture attention, show or increase liking, generate power, and boost credibility (Gifford, 2011). Sometimes deliberately and sometimes without thought, you use nonverbal behaviors in ways that get others to satisfy your wants and needs. For example,

people are more willing to do your bidding when you look them directly in the eye (Tang & Schmeichel, 2015); wear high-status clothing (Gurney et al., 2017); and behave in a friendly, upbeat way (Kleman, 2008). That's why job seekers are coached to dress professionally, offer firm handshakes (King, 2018), and smile often and genuinely (Krumhuber et al., 2009) to help influence employers to hire them.

These kinds of cues signal warmth and involvement known as **nonverbal immediacy**, which is associated with communication competence and credibility (Lybarger, et al., 2017). Influencers on social media who smile more broadly are rated higher in those categories than those whose smiles are closed (Kim & Read, 2021). And teachers who exhibit greater immediacy, both verbal and nonverbal, have more motivated students (Liu, 2021). (See the Assessing Your Communication feature at the end of this chapter to evaluate your nonverbal immediacy.)

7.3.4 Influencing Ourselves

Scholars have long known that nonverbal behavior *reflects* how a person feels. If you're happy, you smile; if you're interested, you make eye contact; if you're gloomy, you slump. But a recent line of research shows that the opposite can also occur—that is, if you change your nonverbal behavior, it can *affect* the way you feel. In essence, your body language influences your emotions.

Here are some of the findings:

- Adopting expansive poses such as hands on hips or spreading out your arms can increase your sense of power and confidence (Körner et al., 2022) as well as your tolerance for pain (Bohns & Wiltermuth, 2012). Holding these postures for just two minutes creates chemical changes in the body—higher testosterone and lower cortisol.
- "Jumping for joy" is more than just an emotional reaction. The act of jumping up and down can actually trigger happiness (Shafir et al., 2013).
- Sitting up straight can improve your mood and self-esteem, and even your memory (Michalak et al., 2014; Nair et al., 2015).
- Smiling for a selfie once a day can improve your mood over time (Chen et al., 2016).

This information has practical applications. Amy Cuddy and her colleagues (2015) suggest that prior to a job interview, you can boost your confidence and create a more forceful presence by discreetly holding a power pose for a minute or two. In fact, any time you're feeling nervous or low, performing the nonverbal cues of how you *want* to feel can help you "fake it 'til you make it." (See Cuddy's TED Talk "Your Body Language May Shape Who You Are" for more on this phenomenon.) A more recent study (Tu et al., 2022) found that less physically attractive people who consciously adopt a powerful posture in an interview reap benefits similar to those of more attractive candidates, countering the effects of "lookism" (see the Dark Side box near Section 7.4.7).

7.3.5 Concealing/Deceiving

You may value and honor the truth, but many of the messages you exchange are not completely truthful. Sometimes you keep silent, sometimes you hedge, and sometimes you may downright lie. As you read in Chapter 4, not all deception is self-serving or malicious; much of it is aimed at saving the "face" of the communicators involved. For example, you might pretend to have a good time at a family celebration or business event even though you are bored senseless. In other cases, you might lie to save your own face and avoid embarrassment. ("Of *course* I read the message you sent me!")

In situations such as these and many others, it's easy to see how nonverbal factors can make the face-saving deception either succeed or fail. When verbal and nonverbal messages conflict, the tendency is to believe the nonverbal (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017). If you scream, "I'm not upset!" while pounding the table, observers are likely to disbelieve your words. That's why most people monitor (and self-monitor) nonverbal cues—facial expression, eye contact, posture, vocal pitch and rate—when trying to detect or conceal deception (Novotny et al., 2018).

It's not easy to determine whether someone is lying—and singular nonverbal cues aren't dead giveaways (Burgoon et al., 2015). As one writer put it, "There is no unique telltale signal for a fib. Pinocchio's nose just doesn't exist, and that makes liars difficult to spot" (Lock, 2004). Moreover, most popular prescriptions about liars' nonverbal behaviors simply aren't accurate (Brennen & Magnussen, 2020). For instance, conventional wisdom suggests that liars avert their gaze and fidget more than non-liars. In fact, liars often sustain *more* eye contact and fidget *less*, in part because they believe that to do otherwise might look deceitful (Vrij & Fisher, 2020). And rather than fidgeting, liars may engage in what is known as the *rigidity effect*. This "freeze response" is more likely when deception is unplanned and the stakes are high (Burgoon, 2018).

Despite the challenges of detecting deception, there are a few nonverbal clues that may reveal it (Ekman, 2009). For example, deceivers typically make more speech errors—stammers, stutters, hesitations, false starts, and so on. Vocal pitch often rises when people tell lies, and liars pause longer before offering answers than

do truth-tellers (Sporer & Schwandt, 2007; Zhang et al., 2022). Perhaps most significantly—because it's a physiological reaction that's not easily controlled—liars' pupils tend to dilate because of the arousal associated with fib-telling (Kim et al., 2019). That's why many professional poker players wear sunglasses.

The bottom line is that nonverbal cues offer important information for detecting deception, but most lies aren't discerned through snap judgments of a facial expression or a shift in posture (Levine & Daiku, 2019). Jumping to conclusions based on limited information isn't wise communication, and it may lead to relational difficulties. Handle this material about deception detection with care and good judgment.

7.3.6 Managing Impressions

Chapter 4 explained that one major goal of communicating is impression management: getting others to view you as you want to be seen. In many cases, nonverbal cues can be more important than verbal messages in creating impressions (Weisbuch et al., 2010). To appreciate how you manage impressions via nonverbal means, consider what happens when you meet strangers you would like to know better. Instead of projecting your image verbally ("Hi! I'm attractive, friendly, and easygoing"), you behave in ways that will present this identity. For example, you might dress fashionably, smile a lot, and perhaps try to strike a relaxed pose.

There are several ways of managing impressions nonverbally. Sandra Metts and Erica Grohskopf (2003) reviewed professional trade journal articles on constructing good impressions and found examples of each of the following categories:

- *Manner* refers to the way you act: how you deliberately stand and move, the way you control facial expressions, and the adjustments you make in your voice. ("Stand tall and walk proudly"; "When meeting others, make direct eye contact and use a firm but friendly handshake.")
- *Appearance* involves the way you dress, the jewelry or other artifacts you wear, hair, makeup, scents, and so on. ("Dress how you wish to be remembered: with assurance, some spark of originality, and in a way that makes you feel comfortable and confident.")
- *Setting* involves the physical items you surround yourself with: personal belongings, vehicles, and even the place you live. ("Mat and frame awards and certificates and display them in your office.") If you've carefully considered what viewers will see on the walls behind you during a video chat, you understand the power of setting to manage impressions.

In the TV series *The Dropout*, high-tech fraudster Elizabeth Holmes (played by Amanda Seyfried) manages impressions nonverbally by deepening her voice, sporting a signature black turtleneck like her idol, Steve Jobs, and purchasing a lavish property for Theranos headquarters. ***Describe an instance in which you managed impressions through your manner, appearance, or setting.*** View larger image

Eyeglasses are an example of artifacts that play a role in impression management—intentionally or not. Consistent with stereotypes, glasses wearers are often perceived as more intelligent, trustworthy, and of higher status than those who don't wear them (Guéguen, 2015; Eggleston et al., 2021). Associating glasses with intelligence may be rooted in biology. One study found that intelligent people are 30 percent more likely to have genes linked to poor eyesight and the need for eyewear (Mahdawi, 2018). Of course, different types of

glasses contribute to a host of differing impressions (see if you can come up with examples).

7.4 Types of Nonverbal Communication

So far, we've talked about the role nonverbal communication plays in interpersonal relationships. Now it's time to look at the many types of nonverbal communication.

7.4.1 Body Movement

A primary way of communicating nonverbally is through physical movement: posture, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, and so on. Social scientists use the term **kinesics** to describe the study of how people communicate through bodily movements (Afifi, 2017). We break them down by category here, although these various features usually work in combination.

Face and Eyes

The face and eyes are probably the most noticeable parts of the body. However, the nonverbal messages they send are not always the easiest to read. The face is a tremendously complicated channel of expression to interpret, for several reasons (Zebrowitz, 2017).

First, it's hard to describe the number and kinds of expressions commonly produced by the face and eyes. For example, researchers have found that there are at least 8 distinguishable positions of the eyebrows and forehead, 8 more of the eyes and lids, and 10 for the lower face (Ekman, 2003). When you multiply this complexity by the number of emotions you experience, you can see why it would be almost impossible to compile a dictionary of facial expressions and their corresponding emotions.

The many phrases that allude to the face suggest its significance in interpersonal communication. People talk about "saving face," needing some "face time," maintaining a "poker face," and "facing your fears." That's because the face may well be "the primary source of communicative information next to human speech" (Knapp et al., 2013). These cues signal emotions as well as intended meanings such as irony (Aguert, 2022).

Humans want and need facial responses from others, as demonstrated in various versions of "the still face experiment" (e.g., Bigelow & Power, 2016). In these studies, mothers adopt an expressionless stare when their infant child tries to gain their attention. When the babies don't get the reactions they seek, they become visibly unhappy and agitated. (Look up "still face experiment" on YouTube to see some very sad babies trying to get their mommies to respond.) In a later version of the experiment, mothers adopted a still face by staring at their smartphones—and their children reacted negatively (Myruski et al., 2018). Small children aren't the only ones who object to not getting nonverbal reactions. Imagine seeing a blank face on your friend when you make

an important self-disclosure, or getting "phubbed" by your partner (see Section 13.2.1) during a night out together. Facial responses are as important to adults as they are to infants.

A central component of facial expression is eye behavior. **Oculesics** is the study of how the eyes can communicate. Scientists from various fields continue to research what poets call "the window to the soul" (Jarrett, 2019). Psychologists have concluded that, on average, a comfortable mutual gaze lasts about three seconds (Binetti et al., 2016). Gazes and glances are usually signals of the looker's interest. However, the *type* of interest can vary. Gazing can be an indicator of liking (Schotter et al., 2010). In other situations, eye contact indicates interest, but not attraction or approval, such as when a teacher glares at a rowdy student or a police officer "keeps an eye on" a suspect. And as discussed in Chapter 3, culture influences the meaning of eye contact. For instance, East Asian cultures tend to see the avoidance of eye contact as a sign of respect and prolonged eye contact as unpleasant and even aggressive (Akechi et al., 2013).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Verbal Planning Helps Nonverbal Delivery

You want to visit and offer comforting words to a friend who just received some bad news. But you may worry that your face and voice won't adequately convey your feelings. What can you do to help sync your verbal and nonverbal expressions?

One answer is to rehearse how you'll deliver the message. Researchers asked participants to video-record messages of

support to a hypothetical friend who just received a cancer diagnosis. Half the participants took time to prepare their words in advance; the others did not. Those who planned their messages displayed more nonverbal concern and spoke with more vocal fluency than did nonplanners. They also used more eye contact and pitch variety. In other words, planners' nonverbal cues better matched and conveyed their verbal messages.

It may sound contrived to rehearse supportive messages before delivering them. But this study suggests that any loss of spontaneity is more than made up for by enhanced nonverbal competence. It's wise to give advance thought to any important message you send. That way you'll increase the odds that *what* you say will be matched by *how* you say it.

Ray, C. D., Floyd, K., Mongeau, P. A., Mark, L., Shufford, K. N., & Neiss, L. (2019). Planning improves vocal fluency and the appearance of concern when communicating emotional support. *Communication Research Reports, 36*, 57–66.

In the United States, making eye contact is generally regarded favorably. Those who look others in the eye are perceived as intelligent (Murphy, 2007), and experts have found a strong correlation between eye contact and interpersonal closeness (Hietanan, 2018). Mobile devices can interfere with eye contact, of course, and research suggests that overuse of technology can dull interpersonal perceptiveness. Preteens who took a five-day break from their cell phones dramatically increased their ability to accurately read others' nonverbal cues (Uhls et al., 2014). Chapters 11 and 13 will have more to say about technology and relationships,

but for now it's worth noting that eye contact distractions can take a toll on interpersonal communication.

Posture and Gestures

To appreciate the communicative value of body language, stop reading for a moment and notice how you're sitting. What does your position say nonverbally about how you feel? Are there any other people near you now? What messages do you get from their present posture? By paying attention to the postures of those around you, as well as to your own, you'll find another channel of nonverbal communication that reveals how people feel about themselves and others.

The English language indicates the deep links between posture and communication. English is full of expressions that tie emotional states to body postures:

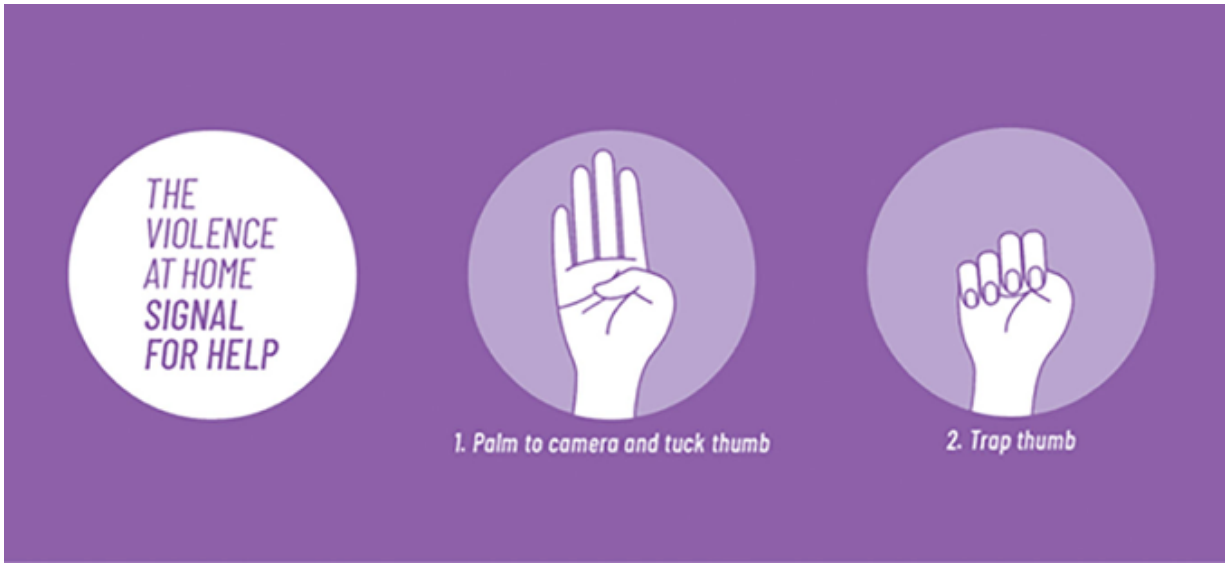
> "I won't take this lying down!"
>
> "Stand on your own two feet."
>
> "Take a load off your back."
>
> "Don't be so uptight!"

Phrases such as these show an awareness of posture, even if it's often unconscious. People often miss posture messages because they're usually understated. Those who feel weighed down by a problem rarely hunch over dramatically.

In interpreting posture, then, subtle cues may provide significant clues. For instance, researchers note that people who commit crimes tend to prey on people who walk with a vulnerable gait (Blaskovits & Bennell, 2019). Therefore, they recommend walking confidently and purposefully if you feel endangered. Projecting confidence, rather than cautiousness, is also an advantage in social situations. Even if you come off as overconfident, these nonverbal displays, relative to verbal assertions, are still viewed positively (Tenney et al., 2019).

Gestures are a fundamental element of communication—so fundamental, in fact, that people who have been blind from birth use them (Bruce et al., 2007) as do people with language impairments such as aphasia resulting from brain injury or Alzehimer's (Clough & Duff, 2020). Gestures are sometimes intentional—for example, a cheery wave or thumbs-up. In other cases, they are done less consciously. For instance, you might give a shrug that means "I don't know" or raise your hands palms up to indicate "What's wrong?" (You can probably think of facial expressions that accompany these gestures). And sometimes a learned gesture can be a lifesaver (see the "signal for help" graphic in this section).

Gestures can produce a wide range of reactions in receivers. For example, increasing hand and arm movements, leaning forward, fidgeting less, and keeping limbs open all make a speaker more effective at influencing others. Even more interesting is the finding that persuasiveness increases when one person mirrors another's movements (Van Swol, 2003). This is logical considering that nonverbal mirroring is a common way to express similarity and affiliation with others (Shellenbarger, 2016).



An abducted teenager was rescued after flashing this nonverbal distress signal to a passing car on a highway (Victor & Medina, 2021). The person who spotted the signal learned it from a TikTok video. ***Do you have gestures or other cues that you use with friends or family members to signal distress?*** View larger image

As with almost any nonverbal behavior, the context in which gestures occur makes all the difference in the results they produce. Animated movements that are well received in a cooperative social setting may seem like signals of aggression or attempts at domination in a more competitive setting. Fidgeting that might suggest deviousness in a bargaining session could be appropriate when you offer a nervous apology in a personal situation. In any case, trying to manufacture insincere, artificial gestures (or any other nonverbal behaviors) will probably backfire. A more useful goal is to recognize the behaviors you find yourself spontaneously delivering and to consider how they reflect the attitudes you already feel.

7.4.2 Touch

Social scientists use the term **haptics** to distinguish the study of touching (Afifi, 2017). Interpersonal touch is basic to health and development (Cascio et al., 2019). For instance, studies show the value of "kangaroo care" for premature babies (Magge, 2022). This involves parents holding their underdeveloped infants close to their skin for one hour a day over two weeks. Compared with babies kept exclusively in incubators, these infants had stronger physiological and cognitive development, slept better, and had lower stress levels. Moreover, the touch sessions increased the parents' bonds with the babies and reduced their anxiety, showing that touch is important for both givers and receivers. The effects on the children in this study were still evident 10 years later. What this finding suggests is that interpersonal touch meets a primal human need.

A host of studies (summarized in Cohut, 2018) show that human touch is as important for adults as it is for children. Appropriate displays of affection—a pat on the back, a touch of the arm, a brief embrace—can relieve stress and improve the emotional well-being of both the giver and the recipient. Partners who share frequent hugs tend to have reduced levels of inflammatory biomarkers in their blood (van Raalte & Floyd, 2021) in addition to lower blood pressure and heart rates. Even the simple act of holding hands can help relieve pain, as the hand-holders experience the physiological benefits of "interpersonal synchronization" (Goldstein et al., 2018).

Couples, regardless of their degree of general relationship satisfaction, benefit from affectionate touch (Jakubiak, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, those living with a romantic partner experienced less stress due to getting their touch needs met

(Burleson et al., 2022). Professionals voiced concern that isolation and quarantine would deprive people living alone of the kinds of touch necessary for mental health (McCluskey, 2020). Some suggested yoga and dance—ideally in coordination with others via video—as a means to stimulate the skin and release neurochemicals in ways that mimic human touch. There was also a spike in foster pet adoptions during the pandemic, as household animals provided companionship and warm physical contact (Garcia, 2020). (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for a self-appraisal of your touch tendencies.)

7.4.3 Voice

To introduce you to the role your voice plays in communication, take a moment to read aloud any paragraph on this page several times, varying these factors as you do so:

- *Rate*: Read it rapidly—and then reread it verrrrryyy slowwwwly.
- *Tempo*: Emphasize *different* words, or put *in*. a few. *pauses*.
- *Volume*: Whisper the first sentence, then announce the others LOUDLY.
- *Pitch*: Read it in a high voice, then a low one—then in a midrange monotone.
- *Tone*: Say the words with attitude. Then sweetly. Then meanly.

Chances are good that with each rendering, you changed how listeners would perceive you—and perhaps you even altered the meaning of the words. Social scientists use the term **paralanguage** to describe the way a message is spoken. In essence, paralanguage is not so much about *what* you say, but *how* you say it.

The impact of paralinguistic cues is strong. Take, for instance, vocal pitch. A deeper voice is associated with maturity, power, and authority (Cheng et al., 2016). In one study, faculty members were asked for directions to a location on campus (Sorokowski et al., 2019). They were also asked to provide commentary for a radio program for young scholars titled, "How to Become a Scientist." Faculty members, regardless of sex or gender, talked normally when giving campus directions—but they lowered their vocal pitch significantly when dispensing expert advice about the sciences. They appeared to know intuitively that lower vocal frequencies are perceived as more authoritative.

Sarcasm is one kind of message in which emphasis, tone of voice, and length of utterance can change a statement's meaning to the opposite of its verbal message (Voyer & Vu, 2016). Experience this reversal yourself with the following three statements. First, say them literally; then say them sarcastically:

> "I really had a wonderful time on my blind date."
>
> "There's nothing I like better than calves' brains on toast."

As with other nonverbal messages, people often ignore or misinterpret the vocal nuances of sarcasm. In some cases, you'll want

to give clues that your words shouldn't be taken literally. An easy way to do this in online communication is through emoticons or emojis (Thompson & Filik, 2016), or shorthand such as "j/k" or "haha." And in face-to-face conversations, sometimes you may need to clarify: "Sorry, I was being sarcastic—maybe I should have just said, 'I don't like it when you tease me in front of my friends.'"

@WORK

Let Your Voice Be Heard

In today's business world, it's easy to forget the value of letting clients, coworkers, and employers hear your voice—literally. Sometimes a phone call is the best way to get a job done.

Using your voice may also be a good way to get hired. In a series of experiments (Schroeder & Epley, 2015), hypothetical employers and professional recruiters watched, listened to, or read job candidates' pitches about why they should be hired. Judges who could hear the candidate's voice rated that person as more competent, thoughtful, and intelligent. Here's what the researchers concluded:

> Although text-based communication media, such as email, may provide quick and easy ways to connect with potential employers, our experiments suggest that voiceless communication comes with an unexpected inferential cost. A person's voice, it seems, carries the sound of intellect.

Besides boosting credibility, spoken words can save valuable time on the job. One global report found that both businesses and consumers prefer the phone to all other communication channels, particularly for time-sensitive interactions. "Despite

the many ways in which our world has changed over the past two years, the phone call remains central to how we communicate," said Alex Algard, Hiya founder and CEO (Ferris, 2022). As sales guru Stuart Leung (2014) observes, text-based sales pitches are no replacement for the warmth that can be communicated in the personal interaction of a voice call.

It's nice to conduct business in person, but that's not feasible in much of today's workplace. When you can't meet face to face and a Zoom call is too cumbersome, remember that email isn't the only means of making contact. Effective on-the-job communication may be only a phone call away.

Even pauses are part of paralanguage. Consider two types that can lead to communication snags. The first is the *unintentional pause*—those times when people stop to collect their thoughts before deciding how best to continue their verbal message. Liars tend to have more of these hesitations than truth-tellers. When people pause at length after being asked a delicate question ("Did you like the gift I bought you?"), it might mean they're buying time to come up with a face-saving—and perhaps less-than-honest—response. A second type of pause is the *vocalized pause*. These range from *disfluencies* such as "um," "er," and "uh" to filler words such as "like," "okay," and "ya know." Vocalized pauses should be avoided since they reduce perceived credibility (Zandan, 2018), especially in job interviews (Fagan, 2019) and other situations where you're trying to sound poised and professional.

Chapter 6 describes how shared language patterns create a sense of *convergence* among communicators. The same is true of paralanguage, as people tend to adopt the vocal patterns of their co-cultural peers (Bernhold & Giles, 2020). For instance, many younger Americans use "uptalk" (statements ending with a rise in pitch). They also use "vocal fry" (words ending with a low guttural rumble), especially when conversing with someone who also uses it (Dallaston & Docherty, 2020). Celebrities such as the Kardashians and *Bachelorette* contestants popularized these vocalic styles (Heid, 2017). It's therefore not surprising that women and girls use them more than men and boys do (Linneman, 2013), although age of the speaker (i.e., Millennial or younger) has more of an impact than gender. The primary point here is that communicators pick up vocal mannerisms—often unconsciously—to affiliate with their speech communities (see Watch and Discuss 7.1 for an example).

Watch and Discuss 7.1: "Who Sounds Gay?"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Which characteristics of one's *voice* are most associated with stereotypes of sexual orientation? In what cases does this video support and refute those stereotypes?

2. Discuss how adopting vocal patterns can create a sense of *convergence* among communicators.

Pause for a moment and take a self-inventory. What feedback have you received about your paralanguage? Do people ask you to speak up or quiet down? Are you a fast or slow talker? Does your pitch signal confidence? Is your speech filled with "um"s, "like"s, and "ya know"s? Do loved ones sometimes react to your tone of voice, or critique not *what* you say but *how* you say it? Aside from qualities that result from your particular vocal cords, most features of your paralanguage are changeable. With a bit of self-monitoring, you can shift the way you talk to improve your interpersonal communication. (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter to build your paralinguistic skill.)

7.4.4 Distance

Proxemics is the study of how communication is affected by the use, organization, and perception of space and distance (Afifi, 2017). Everyone carries around a sort of invisible bubble of **personal space** wherever they go. You think of the area inside this bubble as your own—almost as much a part of you as your own body. Personal bubbles vary in size according to the culture in which a person was raised, the person they're with, and the situation. It's precisely the varying size of a personal bubble—the distance between yourself and

others—that gives a nonverbal clue to feelings (Horan & Booth-Butterfield, 2013).

In a classic study (Crane et al., 1987) researchers tested over 100 married couples, asking partners to walk toward one another and stop when they reached a "comfortable conversational distance." Then they gave each partner a battery of tests to measure their marital intimacy, desire for change, and potential for divorce. The researchers discovered that there was a strong relationship between distance and marital happiness. The average space between distressed couples was about 25 percent greater than that between satisfied partners. On average, the happy couples stood 11.4 inches apart, whereas the distance between unhappy spouses averaged 14.8 inches.

Cultural norms influence preferred spaces (Beaulieu, 2004; Høgh-Olesen, 2008), but so do gender, age, and temperature in a given country (Sorokowska et al., 2017). For example, most Americans stand closer to each other when talking than do most Asians (Andersen & Wang, 2009). Interestingly, the influence of culture on proxemic behavior even extends to online communication. In avatar interactions, Asian dyads maintain larger distances than European dyads, consistent with what occurs in face-to-face interactions (Hasler & Friedman, 2012).

Looking at the distances that American communicators use in everyday interaction, pioneering researcher Edward Hall (1969) found four, each of which reflects a different way you feel toward

others at a given time. By “reading” which distance people select, you can get some insight into their relationship with each other.

Intimate Distance

The first of Hall’s zones, **intimate distance**, begins with skin contact and ranges out to about 18 inches. This distance is reserved for people who are emotionally close, and then mostly in private situations—making love, caressing, comforting, protecting. When we allow others this near to us voluntarily, it’s usually a sign of trust: You’ve willingly lowered your defenses. On the other hand, when

someone invades this most intimate area without your consent, you probably feel threatened (especially when they're "in your face").

Personal Distance

The second spatial zone, **personal distance**, ranges from 18 inches at its closest point to 4 feet at its farthest. Its closer phase is the distance at which most couples stand in public. If someone thought to be sexually attractive stands this near one partner at a party, the other partner is likely to become alert. This "moving in" often is taken to mean that something more than casual conversation is taking place. The far range of personal distance runs from about 2.5 to 4 feet. It's the zone just beyond the other person's reach. As Hall puts it, at this distance you can keep someone "at arm's length." His choice of words suggests the type of communication that goes on at this range: The contacts are still reasonably close, but they're much less intimate than the ones that occur a foot or so closer.

Norms of personal space also apply to selfies. One study of Instagram posts revealed that photos featuring a person's entire body received the highest number of likes, while close-up selfies received the fewest. Researchers claim that face size influences perception of personal boundaries, and viewers see a large face even on social media as an invasion of their personal space (Hong et al., 2022).

Social Distance

The third zone is **social distance**, which ranges from 4 to about 12 feet out. Within this zone, the distance between communicators can have a powerful effect on how you regard and respond to others. For example, medical patients are more satisfied with physicians who use close physical proximity to convey warmth and concern (Grant et al., 2000). However, people with high social anxiety are likely to keep strangers at a greater distance as a safety barrier, perhaps because they estimate that unfamiliar others are closer to them than they actually are (Givon-Benjio et al., 2020).

Public Distance

Public distance is Hall's term for the farthest zone, running outward from 12 feet. The closer range of public distance is the one that most teachers use in the classroom. In the farther reaches of public space—25 feet and beyond—two-way communication is almost impossible. In some cases, it's necessary for speakers to use public distance to reach a large audience, but you can assume that anyone who chooses to use it when more closeness is possible is not interested in a dialogue.

When your spatial bubble is invaded, you probably experience stress. You may respond with *barrier behaviors*, strategies designed to create a barrier (or fix a broken one) between yourself and other people (Evans & Wener, 2007). Invade someone's personal space and notice the reaction. At first the person is most likely simply to

back away, probably without realizing what is happening. Next, your partner might attempt to put an object between you, such as a desk, a chair, or some books clutched to the chest, all in an effort to get some separation. Then the other person will probably decrease eye contact (the "elevator syndrome," in which you can crowd in and even touch one another so long as you avoid eye contact). Furthermore, your reluctant partner might sneeze, cough, scratch, and exhibit any variety of behaviors to discourage your antisocial behavior. The label "antisocial" suggests that you should think twice before running experiments like this. The goal here is to describe the lengths people will go to protect their personal space—and how most of their defense signals are nonverbal. (See Watch and Discuss 7.2 for examples.)

Watch and Discuss 7.2: "Invading Personal Space in Public"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Describe the various *barrier behaviors* used by the people whose personal space is invaded in this video.
2. What role do you think that *culture* plays in response to personal space invasion?

7.4.5 Territoriality

Whereas personal space is the invisible bubble people carry around, **territory** is a stationary area you claim (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001). In a classic study, Robert Sommer (1969) watched students in a college library and found that there's a definite pattern for people who want to study alone. Although the library was uncrowded, students almost always chose corner seats at one of the empty rectangular tables. After each table was occupied by one reader, new readers would choose a seat on the opposite side and at the far end, thus keeping the maximum distance between themselves and the other readers. One of Sommer's associates tried violating these unspoken rules by sitting next to and across from women reading when more distant seats were available. She found that the approached women reacted defensively, signaling their discomfort through shifts in posture, gesturing, or moving away.

Consider how you would react if someone took "your" seat in one of your classes. Even though the chair isn't your possession, you probably have some sense of ownership about it (Kaya & Burgess, 2007). How you respond to perceived violations depends on *who* enters and uses your territory (a friend is less threatening than a stranger) and *why* they do so (a "mistake" is less important than a "planned attack"). It also depends on *what* territory is entered or used (you may care more about a territory over which you have exclusive rights, such as your bedroom, than about a territory in a public area, such as your seat in class).

7.4.6 Time

Social scientists use the term **chronemics** to describe the study of how humans use and structure time (Walther, 2009). The use of time depends greatly on culture. Some cultures (e.g., North American, German, and Swiss) tend to be **monochronic**, emphasizing punctuality, schedules, and completing one task at a time (Flaskerud, 2013). Other cultures (e.g., South American, Mediterranean, and Arab) are more **polychronic**, with flexible schedules in which multiple tasks are pursued at the same time. One psychologist discovered the difference between North and South American attitudes when teaching at a university in Brazil (Levine, 1988). He found that some students arrived halfway through a 2-hour class and that most of them stayed put and kept asking questions when the class was scheduled to end. A half hour after the official end of the period, the professor finally closed off discussion because there was no indication that the students intended to leave.

Even within the same geographic area, different groups establish their own rules about the use of time. Consider your own experience. In school, some instructors begin and end class punctually, whereas others are more casual. With some people, you feel comfortable talking for hours in person or on the phone; with others, time seems precious and not to be "wasted."

Time can be a marker not only of status and culture but also of relationships. Research shows that the amount of time spent with a relational partner sends important messages about valuing that person (Andersen et al., 2006). In one study analyzing 20 nonverbal

behaviors, “spending time together” was the most powerful predictor of both relational satisfaction and perceived interpersonal understanding (Egland et al., 1997). And as we discuss in Chapter 11, spending “quality time” with a partner is one of love’s languages.

If you’ve ever been upset by a friend who hasn’t responded punctually to one of your texts, then you know the role that timeliness plays in mediated interpersonal communication (Kalman et al., 2013). This is a good example of the principle that you cannot *not* communicate. Instructors who respond more quickly to student email also receive more favorable evaluations from them (Tatum, 2021).

7.4.7 Physical Attractiveness

The importance of beauty has been emphasized in the arts for centuries. More recently, social scientists have measured the degree to which physical attractiveness affects interactions between people (Maestripieri et al., 2017). Those whom others view as attractive are rated as being more sensitive, kind, strong, sociable, and interesting than their less fortunate peers (Knapp et al., 2013). More than 200 managers in a *Newsweek* survey admitted that attractive people get preferential treatment both in hiring decisions and on the job (Bennett, 2010). And professors perceived to be “hot” are judged as having more expertise; students are more motivated to learn from them and give them higher teaching evaluations (Liu et al., 2013).

Occasionally, beauty has negative effects. Although "what is beautiful is perceived as good," attractive people may also be perceived as vain (Han & Laurent, 2023). Glamorous beauty can be intimidating (Frevert & Walker, 2014), and interviewers may turn down highly attractive candidates if they consider them threats (Agthe et al., 2011). One study suggests that physically attractive people have trouble maintaining relationships, perhaps because they have high expectations for how they'll be treated by their partners (Ma-Kellams et al., 2017). On the whole, however, the interpersonal benefits of attractiveness far outweigh the downsides, as the Dark Side box in this section describes.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

The Inequality of "Lookism"

What's the problem if attractive people get advantages in life? According to Rachel Gordon and her colleagues (2013), it's that "lookism" is a version of prejudice similar to racism, sexism, and classism. When people get preferential treatment based on their physical appearance, it does a disservice to everyone involved.

The researchers maintain that advantages for the attractive person begin in childhood and pick up steam in adolescence. Young people who are rated as better looking get higher grades and are more likely to attain college degrees than their peers, setting the stage for better economic outcomes throughout adulthood. Studies suggest that above-average beauty translates into 10 to 15 percent higher salaries for the physically attractive (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019).

Rod Hollier (2021) claims that this bias for beauty is quite literally unjust, as less-attractive people get poorer treatment in the legal system. The more attractive the person who committed the crime, for instance, the lower the fine or the sentence.

A starting point for change is raising awareness. It's important to realize that no one—not teachers, not clergy, not parents—is above giving preferential treatment to others on the basis of their physical beauty. When possible, students and job candidates should be evaluated through blind review to avoid partiality. And pay attention to how you treat people in your interactions, asking yourself the question, "Is their appearance affecting the way I communicate with them?" If you're honest, you might be surprised at how often the answer to that question is "Yes." (See Activity 4 at the end of the chapter for an ethical challenge about lookism.)

Fortunately, attractiveness is something you can control without having to call the plastic surgeon. If you aren't totally gorgeous or handsome, don't despair: Evidence suggests that, as you get to know more about people and like them, you start to regard them as better looking (Albada et al., 2002). Moreover, you probably view others as attractive not just on the basis of their "original equipment" but also on how they carry themselves. Confident and positive posture, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, and other behaviors can increase one's interpersonal attractiveness (Tu et al., 2022). Finally, style of dress can make a significant difference in the way others perceive you, as the next subsection explains.

7.4.8 Clothing

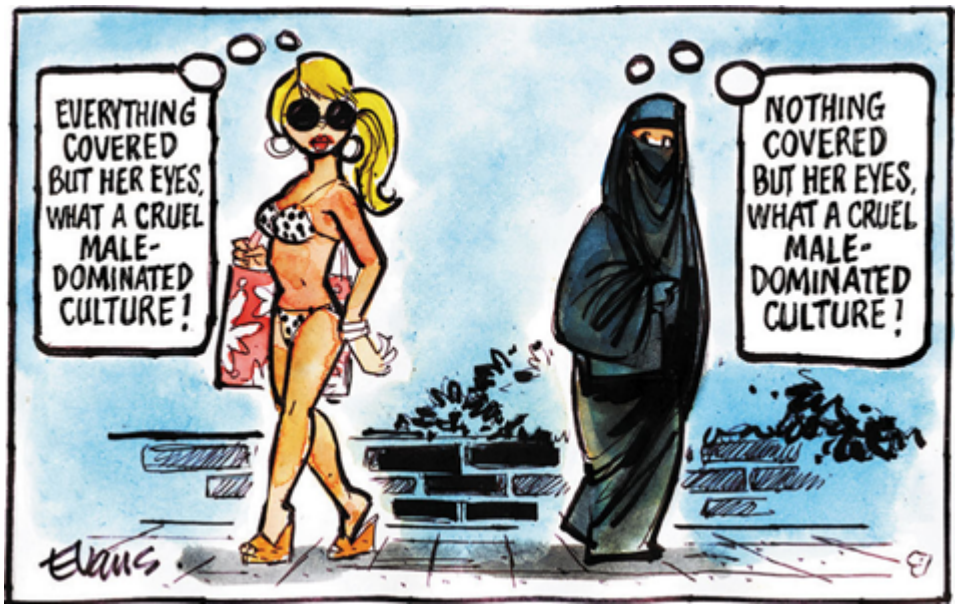
Besides protecting us from the elements, clothing is a means of nonverbal communication. It's a way for some to strategically hide "problem areas" and accentuate "assets" (Frith & Gleeson, 2008). Clothing conveys a variety of messages to others (Rosenbusch et al., 2021), including the following:

1. Economic level
2. Education level
3. Trustworthiness
4. Social position
5. Level of sophistication
6. Economic background
7. Social background
8. Educational background
9. Level of success
10. Moral character

Dressing more formally—whether in a business suit, lab coat, or uniform—tends to enhance perceptions of credibility and expertise. Patients are more trusting of physicians who wear professional medical attire (Landry et al., 2013), and students regard guest lecturers who dress up for their presentations as more credible (Dunbar & Segrin, 2012). However, formal clothing can also create interpersonal distance. For college instructors who are more formally

dressed, student perceptions of their competence increase while perceptions of their warmth decrease (Oliver et al., 2022).

Judgments based on what a person wears, like other perceptions, need to be made carefully. For example, whereas many Americans believe a *hijab*—a "veil" or "headscarf"—functions to oppress women, veiled women see their hijab as helping them define their Muslim identity, resist sexual objectification, and be afforded more respect (Bhowon, 2016). As the cartoon in this section demonstrates, culture can play a significant role in interpersonal perceptions.


EVERYTHING COVERED BUT HER EYES, WHAT A CRUEL MALE-DOMINATED CULTURE!
NOTHING COVERED BUT HER EYES, WHAT A CRUEL MALE-DOMINATED CULTURE!

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 7.1 **Define nonverbal communication.**

Nonverbal communication consists of messages expressed by nonlinguistic means. Often what we *do* conveys more meaning than what we *say*, and nonverbal communication shapes perceptions. By tuning into facial expressions, postures, gestures, vocal tones, and other behaviors, you can make assumptions about the way communicators feel about one another and get some sense about the nature of their relationship.

Q: In a public place, unobtrusively record field notes describing the nonverbal messages you observe. For each observation, record at least two assumptions about the significance of the behavior in question.

Objective 7.2 **Describe the distinguishing characteristics of nonverbal communication.**

Nonverbal communication is pervasive; in fact, nonverbal messages are always available as a source of information about others. Most nonverbal behavior suggests messages about relational attitudes and feelings, in contrast to verbal statements, which are better suited to expressing ideas.

Messages that are communicated nonverbally are usually more ambiguous than verbal communication. Contrary to what some might think, nonverbal cues also play a role in mediated communication. Nonverbal communication is also affected by culture and gender.

Q: Keep a one-day log of significant nonverbal communication (both face-to-face and mediated) in one of your important relationships. For each entry, note (a) whether the behavior was deliberate or unintentional; (b) the relational messages that seem to have been exchanged; (c) the degree of ambiguity about the meaning of the behavior; and (d) gender and cultural factors that may have shaped the nonverbal behavior.

Objective 7.3 **Identify and offer examples of the various functions that nonverbal communication can serve.**

Nonverbal communication serves many functions. It can help create and maintain relationships. It also serves to regulate interaction, to influence others, and to influence yourself. In addition, nonverbal communication can be used to conceal or reveal deception. Finally, we use nonverbal cues to manage impressions with others.

Q: Using the log you created for Objective 7.2, note the functions of the nonverbal behavior in each entry.

Objective 7.4 **Describe how meaning is communicated through particular nonverbal cues.**

Nonverbal messages can be communicated in a variety of ways: through body movement (including the face and eyes, gestures, and posture), touch, voice, distance, territory, time, physical appearance, and clothing. Culture plays a significant role in determining the rules and meanings for each of these factors.

Q: Describe one significant incident in which you communicated nonverbally through each of the channels described in this chapter.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Reflection:** Section 7.2.5 notes that, in general, women are more nonverbally expressive than men and that they interpret nonverbal behavior more accurately. Does that match your experience? Offer specific examples to support or refute your case.
2. **Self-Appraisal:** The benefits of touch are described in Section 7.4.2. How touch-oriented are you? Compare yourself to the most and least touch-oriented people you know. Where do you fall between them? How satisfied are you with the amount of touch you give and receive in a typical day?
3. **Build Your Skill:** Review Section 7.4.3 and do the paralanguage self-inventory described in the final paragraph. Identify something you'd like to work on ("I want to slow down my rate"; "I'd like to use fewer vocalized pauses") and then make a concerted effort for two days to enact those changes. Afterwards, do a self-appraisal—or perhaps ask someone close to you if they noticed a difference. Do you believe that changing your paralanguage can increase your communication competence?

4. **Ethical Challenge:** The Dark Side box near Section 7.4.7 describes the phenomenon of "lookism." Can you identify a time when you've favored others based on their physical attractiveness? Have you ever been the victim of lookism? What is your ethical responsibility to avoid lookism?

Assessing Your Communication: Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviors (Personal Practice)

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

chronemics

emblems

haptics

intimate distance

kinesics

monochronic

nonverbal communication

nonverbal immediacy

Oculesics

paralanguage

personal distance

personal space

polychronic

Proxemics

Public distance

regulators

social distance

territory

CHAPTER 7 Flashcards

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

8
Listening: Receiving and Responding

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **8.1** Describe the nature of listening and the listening styles that interpersonal communicators use.
- **8.2** Explain the challenges that can impede effective listening.
- **8.3** Identify the five components of the interpersonal listening process.

8.4 Effectively use a variety of reflective and directive listening responses.

TAKE A MOMENT TO IDENTIFY THE WORST LISTENER YOU KNOW. Maybe it's someone who interrupts or whose attention seems to wander as you talk. Perhaps this person forgets important things you have said or gives responses that reflect a lack of understanding. Recall how you feel when you're conversing with this poor listener. Irritated? Frustrated? Discouraged?

Now think about how others view *you* as a listener. Which of these behaviors, so annoying in your conversational partners, do you engage in yourself?

In this chapter, you will learn just how important listening is in interpersonal communication. You will read about the many factors that make good listening difficult and find reasons for tackling those challenges. You will learn what really happens when listening takes place. Finally, you will read about a variety of listening responses that you can use to increase your own understanding, improve your relationships, and help others.

8.1 The Nature of Listening

Plenty of people offer advice on how to listen better, such as "close your mouth and open your ears." Although such prescriptions are a good start, they're overly simplistic and don't capture the complex nature of listening. We begin our exploration of this subject by describing the importance of listening in interpersonal communication.

8.1.1 The Importance of Listening

How important is listening? When working adults were asked to name the most common communication behavior they observed in their place of business, "listening" topped the list (Keyton et al., 2013). That's no doubt why managers ranked "ability to listen" as the competence they sought most in new hires (Schaffhauser, 2019). Employees whose supervisors are active, empathic listeners report less stress and higher satisfaction not only in their jobs, but also in their home lives (Kristinsson et al., 2019). Think for a moment about jobs you've held, and whether you felt heard by your managers. Your sense of connection to the organization was likely affected by whether supervisors were willing to listen to you (Reed et al., 2016).

The business world is not the only setting in which listening is vital. When a group of adults was asked to rank various communication skills according to their importance, listening topped the family/social list as well as the career list (Brownell & Wolvin, 2010). In interpersonal relationships, listening helps build trust and contributes to a sense of emotional well-being (Lloyd et al., 2015). With this in mind, we turn our attention to defining this important skill.

@WORK

Listening Is Good Business

Customer service representatives have tough jobs. They're tasked with fielding calls efficiently, but customers sometimes want more than just quick answers. They may want a listening ear. Columnist Maggie Parker (2019) talked to a variety of call center managers, and they uniformly agreed that empathic listening is the key to good customer service.

"If they want to talk, we want to listen," says Rob Siefker of Zappos. "One of our biggest metrics for evaluation is whether we made an emotional connection with every customer." Kurt Shroeder of Avtex agrees: "The customer has two needs: The functional need—what they're originally calling about—and the emotional need—wanting to feel validated, understood, recognized, supported." Schroeder maintains that one without the other isn't good customer service.

Sometimes letting customers talk about personal issues leads to longer call times. Brian O'Mara of Safelite Solutions

doesn't see that as a problem. "In our operation, the emotional needs of the customer take precedence over the transactional needs of the business." He calls that a "more comprehensive" approach to customer service, which leads to better outcomes.

Customer service reps aren't trained therapists, and they should forward serious issues to professionals. But that shouldn't stop them from using a therapists' tools—questioning, paraphrasing, empathizing—to do their jobs well. When customers feel valued and heard, they're likely to return. That's good business.

8.1.2 Listening Defined

So far we have used the term *listening* as if it needs no explanation. Actually, there's more to this concept than you might suspect. We define **listening**—at least the interpersonal type—as the process of receiving and responding to others' messages.

Traditional approaches to listening focus on the reception of *spoken* messages. However, we've broadened the definition to include messages of all sorts because much of contemporary listening takes place through mediated channels, some of which involve the written word (Stewart & Arnold, 2018). Consider times you've said something like, "I was talking with a friend and she *said* … ," when the conversation you recount actually took place via text messaging. Chapters 2 and 10 describe how relational maintenance and social support can be offered in face-to-face communication and also

through blogs, posts, tweets, and other social media mechanisms (Gearhart & Maben, 2021). The focus of this chapter will continue to be on spoken messages (beginning with a discussion of "hearing"), but recognize that "listening" in contemporary society involves more than meets the ear.

Hearing Versus Listening

Listening and hearing aren't identical. **Hearing** is the process in which sound waves strike the eardrum and cause vibrations that are transmitted to the brain. Listening occurs when the brain reconstructs these electrochemical impulses into a representation of the original sound and then gives them meaning (Robinshaw, 2007). Barring disability, injury, or cotton plugs, you can't stop hearing. Your ears will pick up sound waves and transmit them to your brain whether you want them to or not.

Listening, however, isn't automatic. Many times people hear but don't listen. It's a survival mechanism to automatically and unconsciously block out irritating sounds, such as a neighbor's lawn mower or the roar of nearby traffic. You probably stop listening when you find a subject unimportant or uninteresting. Boring stories, television commercials, and nagging complaints are common examples of messages you may tune out.

Mindless Listening

When you move beyond hearing and start to listen, you process information in two very different ways (Bodie et al., 2018). Harvard professor Ellen Langer uses the terms *mindless* and *mindful* to describe these different ways of attending to stimuli (Powell, 2018). **Mindless listening** occurs when you react to others' messages automatically and routinely, without much mental investment. Words such as "superficial" and "cursory" describe mindless listening better than terms like "ponder" and "contemplate."

The term *mindless* may sound negative, but this sort of low-level information processing can be a valuable type of communication. It frees you to focus your mind on messages that require careful

attention (Cline, 2013). Given the number of messages to which you're exposed, it's impractical to listen carefully and thoughtfully 100 percent of the time. It's unrealistic to devote your full attention to long-winded stories, idle chatter, or remarks you've heard many times before. The only realistic way to manage the onslaught of messages is to be "lazy" toward many of them (Griffin, 2006). In situations like these, it can be helpful to forgo careful analysis and fall back on the schemas—and sometimes the stereotypes—described in Chapter 5 to make sense of a message. If you stop right now and recall the messages you have heard today, it's likely that you processed most of them mindlessly.

Mindful Listening

By contrast, **mindful listening** involves giving careful and thoughtful attention and responses to the messages you receive (Jones et al., 2019). You tend to listen mindfully when a message is important to you or to someone you care about. Think of how you would tune in carefully if a close friend told you about the loss of a loved one. In situations like this, you want to give the message-sender your complete and undivided attention (see Figure 8.1).

FIGURE 8.1 The Chinese Characters that Make Up the Verb "to Listen." View larger image

It's tempting to mindlessly process information that deserves—and even demands—mindful attention (Omilion-Hodges & Swords, 2016). Ellen Langer's (2014) determination to study mindfulness began when her grandmother complained about headaches coming from a "snake crawling around" beneath her skull. Doctors quickly diagnosed the problem as senility, interpreting the snake description as nonsense. In fact, the grandmother had a brain tumor that eventually killed her. The event made a deep impression on Langer:

> For years afterward I kept thinking about the doctors' reactions to my grandmother's complaints, and about our reactions to the doctors. They went through the motions of diagnosis, but were not open to what they were hearing. Mindsets about senility interfered. We did not question the doctors; mindsets about experts interfered.

Most decisions about whether to listen mindfully don't have life-and-death consequences, of course. Yet you often need to listen consciously and carefully to what others are saying. That kind of mindful listening is the focus of this chapter. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for an ethical challenge about mindless vs. mindful listening.)

8.1.3 Listening Styles

Not everyone listens the same way or with the same goals all the time. Communication researchers have identified four broad listening styles—task oriented, relational, analytical, and critical—each of which has both strengths and weaknesses (Bodie & Worthington, 2018). Many people use more than one listening style, and the style may vary depending on the situation at hand (Gearhart et al., 2014). (See the Assessing Your Communication feature at the end of the chapter to assess your typical listening styles.)

Task-Oriented Listening

Task-oriented listening is most concerned with efficiency and accomplishing the job at hand. When deadlines and other pressures demand immediate action, task orientation can be beneficial. It's

most appropriate when the primary focus is taking care of business; such listeners encourage others to be organized and concise.

Despite its advantages, a task orientation may alienate others when it seems to ignore their feelings. People with a different temperament, or those who are from cultures where it's impolite to be direct, may not appreciate a strictly task-oriented approach. In addition, a focus on getting things done quickly may come at the expense of thoughtful deliberation and consideration. Finally, task-oriented listeners may minimize the emotional issues and concerns that are so important to many business and personal transactions.

Relational Listening

Relational listening is most concerned with building emotional closeness with others. People who primarily use this style are typically extroverted, attentive, and friendly (Villaume & Bodie, 2007). Relational listeners aim to understand how others feel; they are thus aware of and highly responsive to others' emotions. They strive to be nonjudgmental and are more interested in understanding and supporting people than in evaluating or controlling them. Not surprisingly, relational listeners are more likely than those with other styles to draw out responses from the message-sender (Keaton et al., 2015).

Along with its advantages, relational orientation can have drawbacks. In an effort to be congenial and supportive, relational listeners may lose their detachment and ability to objectively assess information (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011). Less relationally oriented

communicators may view them as overly expressive and even intrusive.

Analytical Listening

Analytical listening emphasizes attending to the full message before coming to judgment. People who default to this style want to hear details and analyze an issue from a variety of perspectives. Analytical listeners can be a big help when the goal is to investigate difficult questions, taking into account a wide range of perspectives. They are especially valuable in thinking systematically about complex issues. This thorough approach can be time-consuming and impractical at times, however, such as when a deadline is fast approaching.

Marty Byrde (Jason Bateman) must listen to others analytically and critically to keep his businesses—and himself—alive in the TV series *Ozark*. ***When do you need to have your critical antennae up in everyday conversations?*** View larger image

Critical Listening

People whose default mode is **critical listening** have a strong desire to evaluate messages. They are concerned not just with understanding messages but with assessing their quality, focusing on accuracy and consistency. This style can be especially helpful when the goal is to investigate a problem. However, critical listeners can also frustrate others by appearing to find fault in even minor details.

Whichever styles you use, it's important to recognize that you can control the way you listen. When your relationship with the speaker needs attention, adopt a relational approach. If investigation is called for, put on your analytical persona. When there's a need for evaluation, become a critical listener. You can also become more effective by assessing and adapting to the listening preferences and styles of your conversational partners.

8.2 The Challenge of Listening

When two or more people are listening to a speaker, it's easy to assume that each understands the same message. But recall the discussion of perception in Chapter 5; many factors cause communicators to perceive an event differently. Physiological and psychological factors, social roles, cultural background, personal interests, and needs all shape and distort the raw data you hear into very different messages (Harris, 2015).

Here are some of the obstacles and bad habits to overcome in order to listen carefully.

8.2.1 Recognizing Barriers to Listening

Listening is more difficult than you might realize. Common barriers to listening include information overload, personal concerns, rapid thought, and noise. Being aware of these potential barriers can help you create environments that are more conducive to listening.

Information Overload

The sheer amount of information you encounter every day makes it impossible to listen carefully to everything you hear. Given this barrage of information, it's virtually impossible to keep attention totally focused for long. As a result, people often choose—understandably and sometimes wisely—to listen mindlessly rather than mindfully.

Personal Concerns

A second reason it's difficult to listen arises from personal concerns that seem more important than the messages others are sending (Nichols, 2009). It's hard to pay attention to someone else when you're anticipating an upcoming exam or thinking about the wonderful time you had last night. When you feel obligated to pay attention to others while your focus is elsewhere, listening becomes mindless at best and often a polite charade.

Rapid Thought

Careful listening is also difficult because of mental processing speed. Although people are capable of understanding speech at rates up to 600 words per minute (Heingartner, 2003), the average person speaks much more slowly during conversation—between 120 and 150 words per minute (Barnard, 2018). This difference means you have a lot of mental "spare time" to spend while someone is talking. The temptation is to use this time in ways that don't relate to the

speaker's ideas, such as thinking about personal interests, daydreaming, planning a rebuttal, and so on. The trick is to use this spare time to understand the speaker's ideas better rather than let your attention wander.

Noise

Finally, physical and mental worlds often present distractions that make it hard for us to pay attention. The sounds of other conversations, traffic, and music, as well as the kinds of psychological noise discussed in Chapter 1, all interfere with your ability to listen well (Zorn & Marz, 2022). In addition, fatigue or other forms of discomfort can distract you from paying attention to a speaker's remarks. For instance, consider how you listen less effectively when you're seated in a crowded, hot, stuffy room full of

moving people and other noises. In such circumstances, even the best intentions aren't enough to ensure understanding.

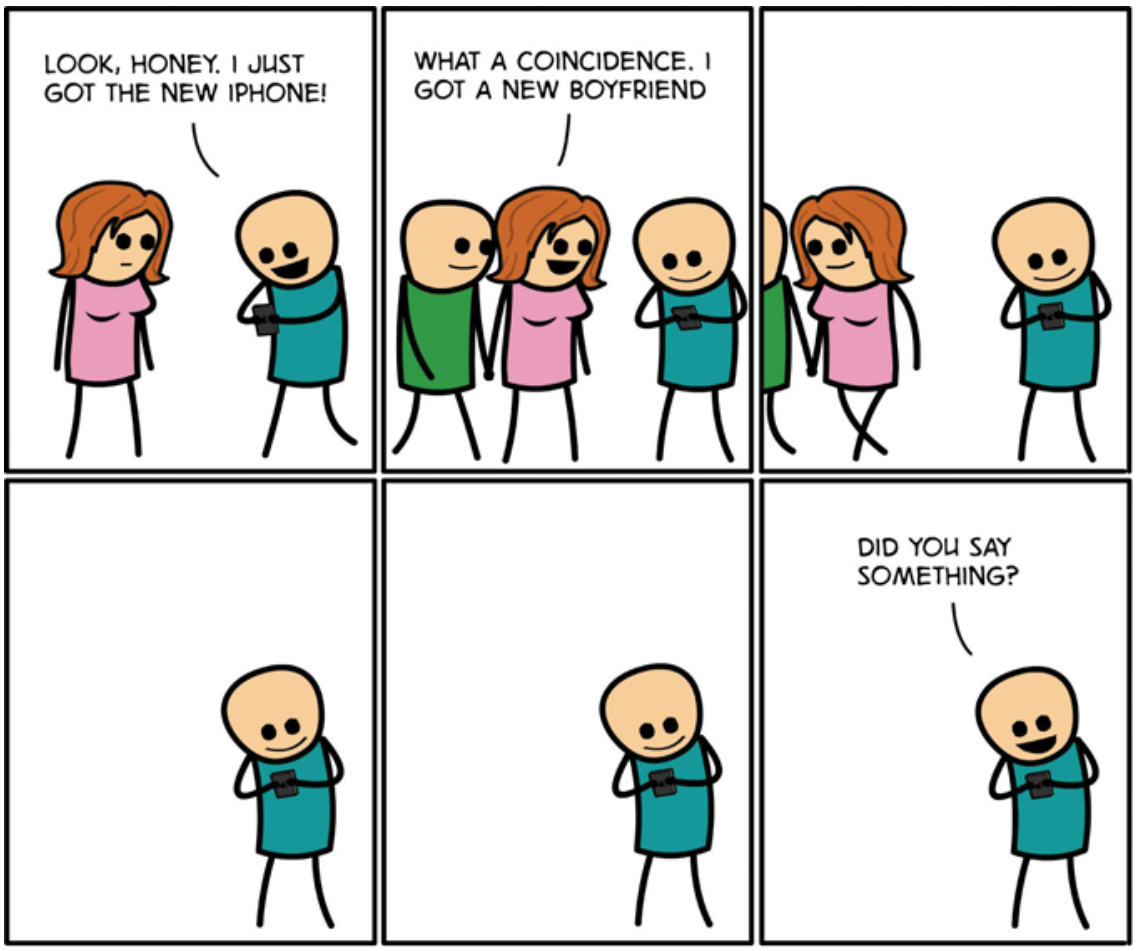
8.2.2 Avoiding Poor Listening Habits

Most people possess one or more habits that keep them from understanding others' messages. As you read the following list of such habits, see which ones describe you. Avoiding these poor listening behaviors begins with awareness of when you engage in them.

- *Pseudolistening* is pretending to pay attention. Pseudolisteners look others in the eye, and they may even nod and smile, but their minds are in another world.
- *Stage hogging* is expressing your own ideas without inviting others to share theirs. Stage hogs allow others to speak from time to time, but only so they can catch their breath; they do not seem to care what others may contribute to the conversation.
- *Selective listening* is responding only to the parts of a speaker's remarks that interest you, ignoring or rejecting everything else.
- *Filling in gaps* is manufacturing information that wasn't part of an original story or message. When people who fill in gaps

retell what they listened to, they present a distorted (not merely incomplete) version of the original.

- *Insulated listening* is almost the opposite of selective listening. Instead of focusing only on topics of interest, these listeners tune out any topics they'd rather not deal with.
- *Defensive listening* is taking innocent comments as personal attacks. Defensive listeners project their own insecurities onto others.
- *Ambushing* is listening carefully only to collect information for use in attacking the speaker. This kind of strategy can ruin a supportive communication climate.


LOOK, HONEY. I JUST GOT THE NEW IPHONE!
WHAT A COINCIDENCE. I GOT A NEW BOYFRIEND
DID YOU SAY SOMETHING?

8.3 Components of Listening

By now, you can begin to see that there is more to listening than sitting quietly while another person speaks. In truth, listening—especially *mindful* listening—consists of five separate elements: hearing, attending, understanding, remembering, and responding.

8.3.1 Hearing

As you've already read, hearing is the physiological aspect of listening. It can be diminished by physiological disorders, background noise, or auditory fatigue, which is a temporary loss of hearing caused by continuous exposure to the same tone or loudness (Sagon, 2017). The World Health Organization estimates that as many as one billion young people worldwide engage in "unsafe listening practices" that may result in permanent hearing loss (Alund, 2022). These include listening "too loud and too long" to music and other entertainment, often through earbuds and headphones. It's wise to protect your hearing—for your own sake as well as for the sake of your relationship partners.

8.3.2 Attending

Whereas hearing is a physiological process, **attending** is a psychological one, and it is part of the process of selection that we described in Chapter 5. As discussed earlier in this chapter, everyday environments are awash in messages from both social and mass media. This deluge of communication has made the challenge of attending tougher than at any time in human history (Ralph et al., 2013). And despite what many believe, accuracy suffers when listening to multiple sources at the same time (see the Dark Side box in this section).

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

The Myth of Multitasking

> "Don't worry—I'm still listening" (while answering a text message)
>
> "I'm paying attention to you" (while Googling)
>
> "It's okay—I can multitask" (while perusing social media)

You've probably heard—or spoken—words like these while talking with friends and family. Most people are convinced they can attend to several message sources at once. In fact, they believe multitasking is an efficient and effective way to communicate.

Research doesn't back these claims. The human brain can only process a finite amount of information at one time, and mobile devices provide a distraction that impairs cognitive focus (Xu et al., 2019). Studies show that media multitasking has a negative effect on learning (Mendoza et al., 2018) and remembering (Uncapher et al., 2016). One review of the literature put it this way: "Research provides clear evidence that mobile media use is distracting, with consequences for safety, efficiency, and learning" (Levine et al., 2012). Safety concerns are the darkest side of multitasking, as texting while driving kills thousands each year (see TeenSafe.com).

The relationship between devices and distraction is so strong that the mere *presence* of a mobile phone can disrupt your listening (Thornton et al., 2014). The sight of a mobile device reminds you of the "broader social community" you're missing out on, says Bill Thornton, the study's lead author. "With the presence of the phone, you're wondering what those people are doing." He recommends putting your phone out of sight when not using it: "Unless you're an advisor to the president and we have a national emergency, you can wait an hour to get a text" (Worland, 2014).

Face-to-face communication is becoming increasingly rare, so it's wise to treat it as a valuable commodity. When you're with another person, lend them more than just your ear—give them your full and undivided attention. (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for a self-appraisal about multitasking.)

You would go crazy if you attended to every message, so it makes sense to filter out some while focusing on others. Not surprisingly, people attend most carefully to messages when there's a payoff for doing so (Burleson, 2007). If you're planning to see a movie, you'll listen to a friend's description of it more closely than you otherwise would. And when you want to get to know others better, you'll pay careful attention to almost anything they say in hopes of advancing the relationship.

Skillful communicators attend to both speakers' words and their nonverbal cues. Imagine you asked a friend, "How's it going?" and she answered, "Fine." Her nonverbal behaviors could either reinforce the statement (big smile, enthusiastic vocal tone) or contrast it (downcast eyes, slumped posture, dejected vocal tone). Some people are simply inattentive to nonverbal cues, but others suffer from a physiological syndrome called nonverbal learning disorder (Strothers, 2018). Due to a processing deficit in the right hemisphere of the brain, people with this disorder have trouble making sense of many nonverbal cues. Whether due to insensitivity or physiology, failing to attend to nonverbal cues is a listening deficit.

8.3.3 Understanding

Paying attention—even close attention—to a message doesn't guarantee that you'll understand what's being said. **Understanding** is attaching meaning to a message. This stage of the listening process is composed of several elements. First, of course, you must be aware of the syntactic and grammatical rules of the language. You must also

be familiar with the speaker's vocabulary and jargon (you can probably remember times when you felt lost in the lingo and acronyms at a new job). Another important factor is what you know about the message's source. Such background knowledge will help you decide, for example, whether a friend's insulting remark is a joke or a serious attack. The context of a message also helps you understand what's being said. A yawning response to your comments would probably have a different meaning at midnight than at noon.

The ideal in interpersonal listening is both to understand and to be understood (Reis et al., 2017)—and to avoid misunderstandings (Crockett et al., 2022). **Listening fidelity** is the degree of congruence between what a listener understands and what the message sender was attempting to communicate (Sawyer et al., 2014). Fidelity doesn't mean agreement. You might listen carefully to a point your friend is making, understand their position quite clearly, and still disagree completely. But the act of understanding sends a positive relational message, even if the communicators don't see eye to eye on the content.

8.3.4 Remembering

The ability to recall information once you've understood it, or **remembering**, is a function of several factors. These include the number of times the information is heard or repeated, and the amount of information received at once (Ranpura, 2013). Communicators are also better at remembering messages with visual

content than ones they've only heard (Cole, 2014). An old proverb holds true: "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember."

Early research on listening revealed that people remember only about half of what they hear immediately after hearing it, even when they listen mindfully (Barker, 1971). Within 2 months, they forget 50 percent of the originally remembered portion, bringing what they remember down to about 25 percent of the original message. However, this loss doesn't take 2 months; people start forgetting immediately (within 8 hours, the 50 percent remembered drops to about 35 percent). Of course, these amounts vary from person to person and depend on the importance of the information being recalled (Cowan & AuBuchon, 2008).

Forgetting important messages can cause relational problems. People often feel slighted when others—especially loved ones—don't remember things they've heard. "I told you this repeatedly and you still forgot?" is a familiar refrain in many interpersonal conflicts.

8.3.5 Responding

All the steps we have discussed so far—hearing, attending, understanding, and remembering—are internal activities. A final part of the listening process involves **responding** to a message—giving observable feedback (Reis & Clark, 2013). In initial interactions, people generally appreciate listeners who respond by asking questions or paraphrasing (Weger et al., 2014). Nonverbal responsiveness is important, too. One study found that when

physicians offered plenty of supportive nonverbal cues—eye contact, nodding, smiling, gesturing, leaning forward—their patients responded with clearer descriptions of symptoms, leading to more accurate diagnoses (Ruben & Hall, 2016). In other words, responsive listening helps both senders and receivers communicate more effectively (Bodie et al., 2015).

Adding responsiveness to our listening model demonstrates that communication is transactional in nature. Listening isn't just a passive activity. As a listener, you are an active participant in a communication transaction, sending and receiving messages simultaneously. These transactions are basic to interpersonal and relational satisfaction. In fact, people don't get the full enjoyment out of good news until they share it with someone who listens and responds supportively (Lambert et al., 2013).

8.4 Types of Listening Responses

Of the five components of listening described in the preceding section, it's responding that lets you know if others are truly tuned in to what you're saying (Fontana et al., 2015). Think for a moment of people you consider good listeners. Why did you choose them? It's probably because of the way they behave while you are speaking.

Participants in one study said they expect listeners to be attentive, understanding, friendly, responsive, and able to maintain a conversational flow (Bodie et al., 2012). What behaviors mark those characteristics? Good listeners:

- ask and answer questions;
- provide reflective and relevant feedback;
- offer their own perspective; and
- respond nonverbally by making eye contact, nodding their heads, and leaning forward.

In other words, although listening begins as an internal mental process, others will determine whether and how you're listening by monitoring your responses.

As Figure 8.2 illustrates, listening responses range from *reflective* feedback, which invites the speaker to talk without concern of evaluation, to more *directive* responses, which evaluate the speaker's messages. The primary goals of reflective feedback are to understand, confirm, and mirror what the speaker said. By contrast, the primary goals of directive feedback are to appraise the speaker's message and provide guidance. We spend the remainder of the chapter looking at when and how to use each response style along this spectrum. Each one is an important component of your listening toolkit.

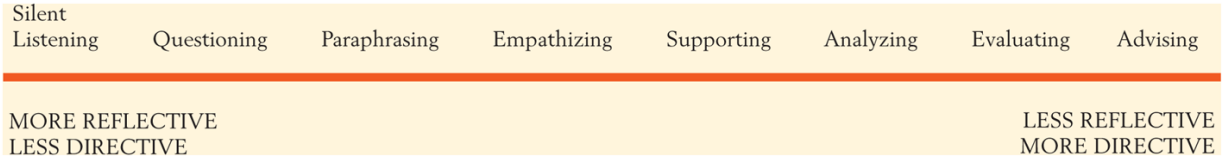


FIGURE 8.2 Types of Listening Responses View larger image

8.4.1 Silent Listening

There are times when the best response is to say nothing. **Silent listening** allows you to stay attentive and nonverbally responsive without offering any verbal feedback.

Communication scholar Sarah Tracy (2019) describes a unique form of silent listening practiced by students at Arizona State University:

> ... [They] stand in public and hold hand-crafted cardboard signs that read "free listening." When passers-by approach and want to talk, the free listener drops their sign, asks them what they want to talk about, and listens. This activity has been successfully incorporated into a range of different courses and for different purposes

such as cultivating listening skills, connection, empathy, and compassion. And, early research suggests that free listening results in people doing more to critically reflect on their assumptions and communicative practices.

Note how this is similar to what's described in the Watch and Discuss 8.1 video.

When was the last time you talked, uninterrupted, to an attentive partner for more than a few minutes? How would you like the chance to develop your ideas without pausing for another's comments? Silent listening is a response style that many of us could profit from using—and receiving—more often. (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter for a reflection about silent listening.)

Watch and Discuss 8.1: "The Listener: The Stories of Craigslist Confessional"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Describe the value of *silent listening* to another person's problems. What are the downsides?
2. Are there circumstances when you might talk about personal matters with a total stranger?

8.4.2 Questioning

Questioning is a type of response in which a listener seeks additional information. There are several reasons to ask sincere, nondirective questions:

- *To clarify meanings.* Good listeners don't assume they know what their partners mean; they ask clarifying questions (Kwok et al., 2020). Here are some examples: "What did you mean when you said he was being 'unfair'?" "You said she's 'religious'—how do you define that term?" "You said you were going 'fast'—just how fast were you going?" Of course, be sure to use an appropriate tone of voice when asking such questions, or they might sound like an inquisition (Tracy, 2002).
- *To learn about others' thoughts, feelings, and wants.* A sincere, sensitive, and caring question can draw out opinions, emotions, needs, and hopes. "What do you think about the new plan?" and "How did you feel when you heard the news?" are examples of such probes. When inquiring about personal information, it is usually best to ask **open questions**, which allow a variety of extended responses, rather than **closed questions**, which allow only a limited range of answers. For instance, "How did you feel?" is an open question that allows a variety of responses, whereas "Did you feel angry?" is a closed question that requires only a yes-or-no answer (and may direct respondents toward feelings they weren't experiencing).

- *To encourage elaboration*. People are sometimes hesitant to talk about themselves, or perhaps they aren't sure if others are interested. Remarks such as "Tell me more about that," "I'm not sure I understand," and "I'm following you" convey concern and involvement. Notice that none of these examples end with a question mark. You can encourage elaboration simply by acknowledging that you are listening.
- *To encourage discovery*. Asking questions can sometimes encourage others to explore their thoughts and feelings. "So, what do you see as your options?" may prompt an employee to come up with creative problem-solving alternatives. "What would be your ideal solution?" might help a friend get in touch with various wants and needs. Most important, encouraging discovery rather than dispensing advice indicates you have faith in others' ability to think for themselves (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2018). This may be the most important message that you can communicate as an effective listener.
- *To gather more facts and details*. People often appreciate listeners who want to learn more, as long as the questions aren't intrusive. Questions such as "What did you do then?" and "What did she say after that?" can help a listener understand the big picture. One study found that teachers who ask questions in parent–teacher conversations before launching into problem solving are perceived as more effective communicators (Castro et al., 2013).

Not all questions are genuine requests for information. Whereas **sincere questions** are aimed at understanding others,

counterfeit questions are disguised attempts to send a message, not receive one. As such, they fit better at the "more directive" end of the listening response continuum pictured in Figure 8.2. It's also likely that they'll lead to a defensive communication climate, as you'll read in Chapter 13.

Counterfeit questions come in several varieties:

- *Questions that trap the speaker.* Asking, "You didn't like that movie, did you?," backs the respondent into a corner. By contrast, "What did you think of the movie?" is a sincere question that is easier to answer. Tag endings such as "Did you?" or "Isn't that right?" can indicate that the asker is looking for agreement, not information. Similarly, questions that begin with "Don't you" (such as "Don't you think she would make a good boss?") direct others toward a desired response. As a simple solution, changing "Don't you?" to "Do you?" makes the question less leading.
- *Questions that make statements.* "Are you *finally* ready?" is more of a statement than a question—a fact unlikely to be lost on the targeted person. Emphasizing certain words also can turn a question into a statement: "You lent money to *Tony?*" You probably also use questions to offer advice. The person who asks, "Are you going to stand up to him and give him what he deserves?" has clearly stated an opinion about what should be done.
- *Questions that carry hidden agendas.* "Are you busy Friday night?" is a dangerous question to answer. If you say "No,"

thinking the person has something fun in mind, you won't like hearing "Good, because I need some help moving my piano." Obviously, such questions are not designed to enhance understanding; they are setups for the proposal that follows. Other examples include "Will you do me a favor?" and "If I tell you what happened, will you promise not to get mad?" Because they are strategic rather than spontaneous, these questions are likely to provoke defensiveness (see Chapter 13). Wise communicators answer questions that mask hidden agendas cautiously with responses such as "It depends" or "Let me hear what you have in mind before I answer."

- *Questions that seek a positive judgment.* "How do I look?" is often a request for a particular response ("You look great!"). The listener must carefully consider the context before responding.
- *Questions based on unchecked assumptions.* "Why aren't you listening to me?" assumes the other person isn't paying attention. "What's the matter?" assumes that something is wrong. As Chapter 5 explained, perception checking is a much better way of confirming assumptions. As you recall, a perception check offers a description of behavior and interpretations, followed by a sincere request for clarification: "When you keep looking at your phone, I think you're not listening to me, but maybe I'm wrong. Are you paying attention?"

No question is inherently sincere or counterfeit, because the meaning and intent of any statement are shaped by its context.

Moreover, a slight change in tone of voice or facial expression can turn a sincere question into a counterfeit one and vice versa. Consider how the questions “What are you doing?” or “When will you be finished?” could be asked in different ways, eliciting different responses.

Research about coming-out conversations (Manning, 2015) illustrates the delicate balance of using questions as an active listener. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants said they wanted to hear certain types of questions from those who listened to their coming-out disclosures. Participants viewed sincere questions as indicators of open communication and a desire to understand. They didn’t appreciate questions that seemed leading (“Are you sure this isn’t a phase?”), defensive (“Is this because I wasn’t around much?”), or inappropriate (asking for graphic sexual details). When a topic is sensitive and emotionally charged, it’s best to keep your questions as open and neutral as possible. “Tell me more—I’m listening” is usually a good option—particularly when it’s said sincerely.

Open questions and reflective paraphrasing are tools of the trade for therapist Brooke Taylor (Uzo Aduba) in the TV series *In Treatment*. ***How can these skills help you become a better listener in your everyday encounters?*** View larger image

8.4.3 Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is feedback that restates, in your own words, the message you thought the speaker sent. You may wonder, "Why would I want to restate what's already been said?" Consider this simple exchange:

FRIEND (ON FRIDAY): "Let's make plans for next Sunday."

YOU: "So, you want to get together the day after tomorrow."

FRIEND: "No, I meant a week from Sunday."

Note that the response rephrased, rather than repeated, the message. In effective paraphrasing, you restate what you think the speaker has said in your own words as a way of checking the meaning you've assigned to the message. It's important to paraphrase, not "parrot-phrase." Simply repeating the speaker's comments verbatim, sounds foolish—and just as important, you still might misunderstand what's been said.

Types of Paraphrasing Statements

Restating another person's message in a way that sounds natural can sometimes be a difficult skill to master. Here are three approaches to get you started:

1. Change the speaker's wording.

   Speaker: "Bilingual education is just another failed idea of bleeding-heart liberals."

   Paraphrase: "Let me be sure I understand: You're mad because you think bilingual ed sounds good, but it doesn't work?"

2. Offer an example of what you think the speaker is talking about. When the speaker makes an abstract statement, you may suggest a specific example or two to see if your understanding is accurate:

   Speaker: "Lee is such a jerk. I can't believe the way he acted last night."

   Paraphrase: "You thought those jokes were pretty offensive, huh?"

3. Reflect the underlying theme of the speaker's remarks. When you want to summarize the theme that seems to have run through another person's conversation, a complete or partial perception check is appropriate:

    Speaker: "Be safe tonight."

    Paraphrase: "Sounds like you're worried something's going to happen to me. Am I right?"

There are several reasons why paraphrasing assists listening. First, as the preceding examples illustrate, it allows you to find out if the message received is the message the sender intended. Second, paraphrasing often draws out further information from the speaker, much like questioning. (In fact, a good paraphrase often ends with a question such as, "Is that what you meant?") Third, paraphrasing is an ideal way to take the heat out of intense discussions. Conversations often intensify when the people involved believe they aren't being heard. Rather than escalating the conflict, try paraphrasing what the other person says: "Okay, let me be sure I understand you. It sounds like you're concerned about . … " Paraphrasing usually short-circuits a defensive spiral because it assures the other person of your involvement and concern. For these and other reasons, you're likely to feel a sense of affinity for those who make the effort to paraphrase your messages (Weger et al., 2010).

Paraphrasing Factual Information

Summarizing facts, data, and details is important during personal or professional conversations. "We've agreed that we'll take another few

days to think about our choices and make a decision on Tuesday—right?" might be an effective way to conclude a business lunch. A questioning tone should be used; a listener wants to be sure that meaning has been shared. Even personal topics are sometimes best handled on a factual level: "So for you the main issue is that our friends take up all the parking spaces in front of your place. Is that it?" Even if you're under attack, maintaining a neutral tone helps clarify facts before you offer your reaction. It's also a good idea to paraphrase instructions, directions, and decisions before acting on what you *think* has been said.

Paraphrasing Personal Information

Restating factual information is relatively easy. On the other hand, it takes a sensitive ear to listen for others' thoughts, feelings, and wants. The underlying message is often the more important one, and effective listeners try to reflect what they hear at this level (Bodie et al., 2016). Listening for thoughts, feelings, and wants addresses three domains of human experience: cognitive (rational), affective (emotional), and behavioral (desired action). Read the following statement as if a friend were talking to you, and listen for all three components (think, feel, want) in the message:

> Maria has hardly been home all week—she's been so busy with work. She rushes in just long enough to eat dinner, then she buries herself writing code until bedtime. Then she tells me today that she's going out Saturday with some friends from high school. I guess the honeymoon is over.

What does the speaker think, feel, and want? Paraphrasing can help you find out. Here are two possible responses:

> "Sounds like you're unhappy (feeling) because you think Maria is ignoring you (thought) and you want her to spend more time with you (want)."
>
> "So you're frustrated (feeling) because you'd like Maria to change (want), but you think it's hopeless because you have such different priorities (thought)."

Recognize that you may not be accurate with either option. Recognize also that you could identify an entirely different think-feel-want set. The fact that these examples offer distinct interpretations of the same message demonstrates the value of paraphrasing.

Your paraphrases don't have to be as long as these examples. It's often a good idea to mix paraphrasing with other listening responses. In many cases, you'll want to reflect only one or two of the think-feel-want components. The key is giving feedback that is appropriate for the situation and offering it in a way that assists the listening process. Because paraphrasing is likely to be an unfamiliar way of responding, it may feel awkward at first. Research suggests that rehearsing paraphrasing in imagined interactions can help you respond more effectively in actual conversations (Vickery et al., 2015). If you start by paraphrasing occasionally and then gradually do it more often, you can begin to see the benefits of this method.

"You're a very good listener. You hear my feelings."

8.4.4 **Empathizing**

Empathizing is a response style listeners can use when they want to show they *identify* with a speaker. As Chapter 5 explained, empathy involves perspective taking, emotional contagion, and genuine concern. When listeners put the attitude of empathy into verbal and nonverbal responses, they engage in empathizing (Suwinyattichaiporn et al., 2021). Sometimes these responses can be quite brief: "Uh-huh," "I see," "Wow!," "Ouch!," "Whew!" In other cases, empathizing is expressed in statements such as these:

> “I can see that really hurts.”
>
> “I know how important that was to you.”
>
> “It’s no fun to feel unappreciated.”
>
> “I can tell you’re really excited about that.”
>
> “Wow, that must be rough.”
>
> “I think I’ve felt that way, too.”
>
> “Looks like that really made your day.”
>
> “This means a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

Empathizing falls near the middle of the listening response spectrum pictured in Figure 8.2. It’s different from the more reflective responses at the left end of the spectrum, which attempt to gather information neutrally. It is also different from the more evaluative styles at the right end of the spectrum, which offer more direction than reflection. To understand how empathizing compares to other types of responses, consider these examples:

> “So your boss isn’t happy with your performance, and you’re thinking about finding a new job.” (Paraphrasing)
>
> “Ouch—I’ll bet it hurt when your boss said you weren’t doing a good job.” (Empathizing)
>
> “Hey, you’ll land on your feet—your boss doesn’t appreciate what a star you are.” (Supporting)

Notice that empathizing identifies with the speaker’s emotions and perceptions more than paraphrasing, yet it offers less evaluation and

agreement than supporting responses. In fact, it's possible to empathize with others while disagreeing (Gordon & Chen, 2016). For instance, the response "I can tell that this issue is important to you" legitimizes a speaker's feelings without assenting to that person's point of view (note that it could be said to either a friend or a foe at a business meeting). Empathizing is therefore an important skill whether you agree or disagree with the speaker.

Watch and Discuss 8.2: "Brené Brown on Empathy"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Consider how some attempts at *empathizing* fall short of being helpful.
2. Discuss how you like others to respond when you tell them about struggles you're having.

Another way to explain empathizing is to describe what it *doesn't* sound like. Many listeners believe they are empathizing when, in fact, they're offering responses that are evaluative and directive—providing "cold comfort" (Hample, 2011) that dismisses the other person's feelings (Rains & High, 2021). Listeners are probably *not* empathizing when they:

- *Deny others the right to their feelings*. Consider this common response to another person's problem: "Don't worry about it." Although the remark may be intended as a reassuring comment, the underlying message is that the speaker wants the person to feel differently. It's unlikely that people can or will stop worrying or being upset just because you tell them to do so.
- *Minimize the significance of the situation*. Think about the times someone said to you, "Hey, it's only . ..." You can probably fill in the blank a variety of ways: "a game," "words," "a test," "a party." How did you react? You probably thought the person who said it just didn't understand. To someone who has been the victim of verbal abuse, the hurtful message wasn't "just words"; to a child who didn't get an invitation, it wasn't "just a party"; to a student who has flunked an important exam, it wasn't "just a test." When you minimize the significance of someone else's experience, you aren't empathizing. Instead, you are interpreting the event from your perspective and then passing judgment—rarely a helpful response (LeFebvre et al., 2020).
- *Focus on yourself*. It can be tempting to talk at length about a similar experience you've encountered ("I know exactly how you feel. Something like that happened to me—let me tell you about it . ... "). Although your intent might be to show empathy, such messages aren't perceived as helpful because they draw attention away from the distressed person (Headlee, 2017).

- *Rain on the speaker's parade*. Most of the preceding examples deal with difficult situations or messages about pain. However, empathizing involves identifying with others' joys as well as their sorrows. Many of us can recall coming home with exciting news, only to be told "A 5 percent raise? That isn't so great." "An *A minus*? Why didn't you get an *A*?" "Big deal—I got one of those years ago." People want empathy during the good times as much as the bad—perhaps even more. One study put it this way: "I *like* that you feel my pain, but I *love* that you feel my joy" (Andreychik, 2019).

8.4.5 Supporting

So far, we have looked at listening responses that put a premium on being reflective and nonevaluative. However, there are times when other people want to hear more than a reflection of how *they* feel: They would like to know how *you* feel about *them*. **Supporting** responses reveal the listener's solidarity with the speaker's situation. There are several types of supportive responses:

Agreement	"Yeah, that class was tough for me too."
	"You're right—the landlord is being unfair."
Offers to help	"I'm here if you need me."

	“Let me try to explain it to him.”
Praise	“I think you did a great job!”
	“You have so much going for you.”
Reassurance	“The worst part seems to be over. It will probably get easier from here.”
	“You’ve got this.”
Diversion	“Let’s catch a movie and get your mind off this.”
	“That reminds me of the time we . ...”

The title character in the TV series *Ted Lasso* (played by Jason Sudeikis) may not know much about British football, but he’s a supportive listener who encourages teamwork and trust. ***Identify the most supportive listener you know and describe that person’s listening traits.*** View larger image

Even the most sincere supportive efforts don't always help. Mourners suffering from the recent death of a loved one often report that a majority of the comments made to them are unhelpful (Ishida et al., 2018). Most of these statements are advice: "You've got to get out more" and "Don't question God's will." Another frequent response is an attempt to offer perspective, such as, "She's out of pain now" and "Time heals all wounds." A study of bereaved parents found that these kinds of clichés actually do more harm than good (Toller, 2011). Communication scholar Jocelyn DeGroot (2020) offers suggestions on how to respond to grieving friends on social media posts:

> When you see the bad news, don't delay, deliberate or draft and redraft responses you'll never send. "I'm sorry for your loss" or "I'm thinking of you" are perfectly good messages. I always advise sharing a favorite memory of the deceased, but if you don't have one, it is fine to say, "I didn't know your loved one personally, but I wanted to let you know I'm thinking about your family."

As with the other helping styles, supporting can be beneficial, but only under certain conditions (Pogue, 2019):

- *Make sure your expression of support is sincere*. Phony agreement or encouragement is probably worse than no support at all because it adds the insult of your dishonesty to whatever pain the other person is already feeling.
- *Be sure the other person can accept your support*. Sometimes people are so upset that they aren't ready or able to hear anything positive. When you know a friend is going through a difficult time, it's important not to be overly intrusive before that person is ready to talk and receive your support.

- *Focus on "here and now" rather than "then and there."* Although it's sometimes true that "You'll feel better tomorrow," it sometimes isn't. More important, focusing on the future avoids supporting in the present. Even if the prediction that "ten years from now, you won't even remember her name" proves correct, it gives little comfort to someone experiencing heartbreak today.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Responding Supportively to Those in Need

You've just learned that a family member—or a friend or a coworker—has cancer. What should you say to that person? How can you help? Communication researchers interviewed 43 cancer survivors to learn which messages they found helpful and unhelpful from those trying to offer support.

Participants remembered twice as many helpful messages as unhelpful ones and said they came in all shapes and sizes. They appreciated simple comments such as "I'm thinking about you" and "I care about you," especially from people they hadn't heard from recently. They also valued words of encouragement and expressions of understanding, such as the sister-in-law who said to one patient, "This sucks and it's okay to feel bad about it." Support frequency—regular visits and phone calls—counted for a lot. And sometimes support didn't involve words, but rather took the form of food left on the porch or rides provided.

On the unhelpful side, patients noticed when people said "Let me know if you need anything" but then withdrew from

their lives. "After I was diagnosed," said one participant, "people didn't even want to make eye contact. People were scared to come up and talk to me." Platitudes such as "It's going to be okay" didn't go over well. One participant recalled being flippantly told by someone she barely knew, "I looked it up and you'll probably be fine."

Although participants counted on support from those closest to them, they appreciated well wishes and kind deeds from anyone in their social sphere. When someone you know is going through tough times, consider the many ways you can express and show your support.

Wanzer, M. B., & Czapla, J. (2022). "I looked it up and you'll probably be fine": Cancer survivors' perceptions of helpful and unhelpful support messages and sources. *Communication Quarterly, 70,* 382–406.

8.4.6 **Analyzing**

In **analyzing** a situation, the listener offers an interpretation of a speaker's message ("I think what's really bothering you is … "; "She's doing it because … "; or "Maybe the problem started when he … "). Communicators who respond this way often use the analytical listening style described earlier in this chapter (Section 8.1.3). This style can be effective in helping others see alternative meanings of a situation. Sometimes an analysis helps clarify a confusing problem, providing a more objective understanding.

In other cases, an analysis can create more problems than it solves, for two reasons. First, your interpretation may not be correct, in

which case the problem holder may become even more confused by accepting it. Second, even if your analysis is accurate, sharing it with the problem holder might not be useful. There's a chance that it will arouse defensiveness (analysis implies being superior and in a position to evaluate). Besides, the problem holder may not be able to understand your view of the problem without working it out personally.

How can you know when it's helpful to offer an analysis? Here are some guidelines:

- *Offer your interpretation tentatively*. There's a big difference between saying "Maybe the reason is … " and insisting "This is the truth."
- *Your analysis ought to have a reasonable chance of being correct*. An inaccurate interpretation—especially one that sounds plausible—can leave a person more confused than before.
- *Make sure the other person will be receptive to your analysis*. Even if your interpretation is completely accurate, your thoughts won't help if the problem holder isn't ready to consider them. Pay attention to the other person's verbal and nonverbal cues to see how your analysis is being received.
- *Be sure that your motive for offering an analysis is truly to help*. It can be tempting to offer an analysis to show how brilliant you are or even to make the other person feel bad for not having thought of the right answer in the first place.

> Needless to say, an analysis offered under such conditions isn't helpful.

8.4.7 Evaluating

An **evaluating** response appraises the sender's thoughts or behaviors in some way. The evaluation may be favorable ("That's a good idea" or "You made the right call") or unfavorable ("That won't get you anywhere" or "You got what you deserved"). In either case, it implies that the person evaluating is in some way qualified to pass judgment on the speaker's thoughts or actions. Communicators who respond this way often approach situations with the critical listening style described earlier in this chapter (Section 8.1.3).

Sometimes negative evaluations are purely critical. You may be familiar with responses such as "Well, you asked for it!" or "I told you so!" or "You're just feeling sorry for yourself." Such comments usually make matters worse by arousing defensiveness.

Other times, negative evaluations are less critical. These involve what we usually call *constructive criticism*, which is intended to help the problem holder improve in the future (Stringer, 2021). Friends give this sort of feedback about the choice of everything from clothing to jobs to friends. A common setting for constructive criticism is school, where instructors evaluate students' work to help them master concepts and skills (Hadden & Frisby, 2019). Even constructive criticism can arouse defensiveness because it may threaten the self-concept of the person at whom it is directed (see Chapter 13 for tips

on creating supportive communication climates). It's best to offer some measure of empathy ("I know you worked hard on this") before or after your evaluative comments.

8.4.8 Advising

When approached with another's problem, the most common reaction is **advising** (Feng & Magen, 2016). You're probably familiar with advising responses: "If you're so unhappy, you should quit the job"; "Just tell him what you think"; "You should take some time off."

Even though advice might be just what a person needs, there are several reasons why it often isn't helpful. First, it may not offer the best suggestion about how to act. There's often a temptation to tell others how you would behave in their place, but it's important to realize that what's right for one person may not be right for another. Second, the position of advice recipient is a potentially unwelcome identity because it may imply inferiority (Shaw & Hepburn, 2013). Third, a related consequence of advising is that it often allows others to avoid responsibility for their decisions. A partner who follows a suggestion of yours that doesn't work out can always pin the blame on you. Finally, people often don't want advice: They may not be ready to accept it and instead may simply need to talk out their thoughts and feelings.

Studies on advice giving (summarized in MacGeorge et al., 2019) offer the following important considerations when trying to help others:

- *Is the advice needed?* If the person has already taken a course of action, giving advice after the fact ("I can't believe you got back together with him") is rarely appreciated.
- *Is the advice wanted?* People generally don't value unsolicited advice (Paik, 2020). It's usually best to ask if the speaker is interested in hearing your counsel. Remember that sometimes people just want a listening ear, not solutions to their problems.
- *Is the advice given in the right sequence?* Advice is more likely to be received after the listener first offers empathizing, paraphrasing, and questioning responses to understand the speaker and the situation better.
- *Is the advice coming from an expert?* If you want to offer advice about anything from car purchasing to relationship managing, it's important to have experience and success in those matters. If you *don't* have expertise, it's a good idea to offer the speaker supportive responses, then encourage the person to seek out expert counsel.
- *Is the advisor a close and trusted person?* Although sometimes you might seek out advice from someone you don't know well (perhaps because they have expertise), in most cases listeners value advice given within the context of a close and ongoing interpersonal relationship.
- *Is the advice offered in a sensitive, face-saving manner?* No one likes to feel bossed or belittled, even if the advice is good (Miczo & Burgoon, 2008). Remember that messages have both content and relational dimensions. Sometimes the

unstated relational messages when giving advice ("I'm smarter than you"; "You're not bright enough to figure this out yourself") will keep people from hearing counsel.

- *Is the advice framed effectively?* Gain-framed advice ("A college degree will open doors for you") is perceived as more helpful than the loss-framed variety ("Without a college degree, you'll never get hired"), and more likely to be heeded (Jang & Feng, 2018).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Chatbots Soften Advice with Empathy

When giving advice on a personal matter, a little empathy can make suggestions easier to take ("That sounds like a tough situation—here's one thought on what you might try"). But what if the advice comes from a computer—specifically, a chatbot with programmed responses? Do you expect a personal message from an impersonal source?

In short, the answer is yes. Researchers ran experiments in which chatbots provided online medical advice about a sensitive topic—sexually transmitted diseases. Even though participants knew they were receiving information from a computer, they still viewed the advice more favorably if it was delivered with empathy. When chatbots preceded their prescriptions with "I'm sorry to hear that" or "I understand your anxiety about being infected," respondents felt more supported than if they had simply been told what to do. Empathic chatbots were also

perceived as more likeable and intelligent—even though their intelligence was artificial.

This might seem counterintuitive to those who believe we want "just the facts" from computers. What this shows is that regardless of the source, a spoonful of sugar helps the medical advice go down.

Liu, B., & Sundar, S. S. (2018). Should machines express sympathy and empathy? Experiments with a health advice chatbot. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 21*, 625–636.

8.4.9 Which Response Type to Use?

You can see that each type of listening response has advantages and disadvantages. So which type is best? There's no simple answer to this question. All response types and styles have the potential to help others accept their situation, feel better, and have a sense of control over their problems (Weger et al., 2014).

As a rule of thumb, it's probably wise to begin with responses from the left side of the listening response spectrum (Figure 8.1): silent listening, questioning, paraphrasing, and empathizing. These skills comprise what pioneering therapist Carl Rogers (2003) called *active listening* (see also Weger et al., 2014). Rogers maintained that helpful interpersonal listening begins with reflective, nondirective responses. Once you've gathered the facts and demonstrated your interest and concern, it's likely that the speaker will be more receptive to (and perhaps even ask for) your analyzing, evaluating, and advising responses (MacGeorge et al., 2017). (See Activity 4 at

the end of the chapter to build your skill in using listening responses.)

You can boost the odds of choosing the best response in each situation by considering three factors:

1. *Match your response to the nature of the problem*. People sometimes need your advice. In other cases, your encouragement and support will be most helpful; and in still other instances, your analysis or judgment may be truly useful. And, as you have seen, there are times when your questioning and paraphrasing can help others find their own answers.
2. *Think about the* other person *when deciding which approach to use*. It's important to be sure that the other person is open to receiving *any* kind of help. Furthermore, you need to be confident that you will be regarded as someone whose support is valuable. The same listening response can be regarded as helpful or not, depending on who's delivering it (Rossetto, 2015). Consider how an "insider" to your job, social circle, or family can offer encouragement or advice ("Hang in there—it will get better") that might ring hollow if it came from an "outsider."

   It's also important to match the type of response you offer with the style of the person to whom it is directed. One study found that highly rational people tend to respond more positively to advice than do more emotional people (Feng & Lee, 2010). Many communicators are extremely defensive

and aren't capable of receiving analysis or judgments without lashing out. Still others aren't equipped to think through problems clearly enough to profit from questioning and paraphrasing. Sophisticated listeners choose a style that fits the person.

3. *Think about yourself when deciding how to respond.* Most of us reflexively use one or two styles. You may be best at listening quietly, posing a question, or paraphrasing from time to time. Or perhaps you are especially insightful and can offer a truly useful analysis of the problem. Of course, it's also possible to rely on a response style that is *unhelpful.* You may be overly judgmental or too eager to advise, even when your suggestions are invited or productive. As you think about how to respond to another's problems, consider your weaknesses as well as your strengths.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 8.1 **Describe the nature of listening and the listening styles that interpersonal communicators use.**

Listening is both more frequent and less emphasized than speaking. Despite its relative invisibility, listening is at least as important as speaking. Research shows that good listening is vital for both personal and professional success.

Listening is the process of making sense of others' spoken messages. We listen to many messages mindlessly, but it's important to listen mindfully in a variety of situations. We also listen to others based on personal styles and listening goals. Sometimes our listening is task oriented; other times it's more relational, analytical, or critical. Good listeners match their styles with the needs of the situation.

Q: Keep a diary of your listening behavior for a representative day. Identify your listening style(s) in each situation you record. Which styles did you use most and least often? How satisfied are you with this finding?

Objective 8.2 **Explain the challenges that can impede effective listening.**

Most peoples' understanding of listening is based on poor listening habits and also on several misconceptions that communicators need to correct. Mindful listening is not easy; rather, it is a challenge that requires much effort and talent. Several barriers can hamper effective listening: personal concerns, information overload, rapid thought, and both internal and external noise. Even careful listening does not mean that all listeners will receive the same message. A wide variety of factors discussed in this chapter can result in widely varying interpretations of even simple statements.

Q: For each entry in the diary from Objective 8.1, evaluate how effectively you listened. Which of the challenges described in this chapter interfered most with your listening? How can you better manage those challenges?

Objective 8.3 **Identify the five components of the interpersonal listening process.**

Listening consists of several components: hearing, attending to a message, understanding the statement, recalling the message after the passage of time, and responding to the speaker. Roadblocks to effective communication can occur at each stage of the process.

Q: Use the events in your diary to identify your strengths and weaknesses as a listener. Which components of the listening process do you manage well, and which are problematic? How can you address the problematic components?

Objective 8.4 **Effectively use a variety of reflective and directive listening responses.**

Listening responses are important because they let us know if others are truly tuned in to what we're saying. Listening responses can be placed on a continuum. More reflective/less directive responses include silent listening, questioning, paraphrasing, and empathizing. These put a premium on gathering information and showing interest and concern. Less reflective/more directive responses include supporting, analyzing, evaluating, and advising. These put a premium on offering input and direction. It is possible to use the "more reflective" listening responses to help people arrive at their own decisions without offering advice or evaluation. The most effective listeners use several styles, depending on the situation, the other person, and their own personal skills and motivation.

Q: Use your listening diary to identify your most and least frequent response styles. How satisfied are you with your findings? How can you respond more effectively?

ACTIVITIES

1. **Ethical Challenge:** Section 8.1.2 describes the difference between mindless and mindful listening. Is it ethical to listen to others mindlessly? If so, under what conditions? What about some of the poor listening habits in Section 8.2.2 such as pseudolistening, selective listening, and insulated listening? Are they ever justifiable or even competent? What is your ethical responsibility as a listener?
2. **Self-Appraisal:** The Dark Side box in Section 8.3 maintains that multitasking is a myth, and that good listeners can't give their full attention to multiple stimuli at the same time. How often do you attend to multiple sources simultaneously? How competently do you think you perform in such situations? Now ask two people who know you well to appraise your ability to multitask. Does your self-appraisal match theirs?
3. **Reflection:** Section 8.4.1 describes the value of silent listening—staying attentive and nonverbally responsive without offering any verbal feedback. How easy or difficult is silent listening for you? How often do you practice it? Do you wish others would allow you to talk without interruption more often?

4. **Build Your Skill:** Think of a recent time when someone told you about a problem—maybe financial difficulties, a relational breakup, or a health scare. Give specific examples of each of these listening responses (Section 8.4) you might have offered:
    a. Questioning
    b. Paraphrasing
    c. Empathizing
    d. Supporting
    e. Analyzing
    f. Evaluating
    g. Advising

Which of these responses do you think would have been most helpful in this situation—and why? Which would have been the poorest option—and why?

Assessing Your Communication: Your Listening Styles (Personal Practice)

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

advising

Analytical listening

analyzing

attending

closed questions

counterfeit questions

critical listening

Empathizing

evaluating

Hearing

listening

Listening fidelity

mindful listening

Mindless listening

open questions

Paraphrasing

Questioning

Relational listening

remembering

responding

Silent listening

sincere questions

Supporting

Task-oriented listening

Understanding

CHAPTER 8 Flashcards

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9
Emotions

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **9.1** **Explain how emotions are experienced and expressed.**
- **9.2** **Describe the various personal and social influences on emotional expression.**
- **9.3** **Demonstrate how to express your emotions appropriately and effectively.**
- **9.4** **Distinguish between facilitative and debilitative emotions, and explain how reappraisal may be**

used to manage emotions effectively.

IMAGINE HOW DIFFERENT YOUR LIFE would be if you lost your ability to experience emotions. An emotionless world would be free of boredom, frustration, fear, and loneliness. But it would also be without joy, pride, excitement, and love. Few would be willing to make that sort of trade-off.

Daniel Goleman (1995, 2020) popularized the term **emotional intelligence** to describe the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions and to be sensitive to others' feelings. He maintains that success depends on one's EQ—emotional intelligence quotient—as much as one's IQ. Studies show that emotional intelligence is positively linked with empathic listening abilities (Pence & Vickery, 2012), psychological well-being (Aloia & Brecht, 2017), leadership attributes (Mullen et al., 2019), and effective workplace interactions (Miao et al., 2017). Employers have come to value emotional intelligence for its "deep impact on everything a person does" on the job (Whitener, 2020). And singles report that emotional intelligence and maturity are the characteristics they look for most in a romantic partner, besting other qualities such as good looks (Lang, 2021). Here are five attributes of EQ (Akers & Porter, 2018):

- Self-awareness (in touch with emotions)
- Self-regulation (appropriate control of emotions)
- Motivation (drive and initiative unhampered by emotions)
- Empathy (in touch with others' emotions)
- Social skills (appropriate communication of emotions)

Stop for a moment and identify someone you know who is emotionally intelligent. Perhaps it's a family member who is in touch with a wide range of feelings without being overwhelmed by them, or a boss who makes wise and rational choices even under stress. Now think of a person who might be lacking emotional intelligence. Maybe it's a colleague who is uptight and dismissive about honest human feelings, or a friend who blows up at the smallest inconvenience. And finally, assess your own emotional intelligence. How well do *you* understand and manage your emotions, and how sensitive are you to others' feelings? The Assessing Your Communication quiz at the end of the chapter can help you make that call.

Because emotions are such an important part of human communication, this chapter explores what feelings are, how they're handled in contemporary society, and when recognizing and expressing them can improve relationships. The chapter concludes by

examining methods for coping with troublesome feelings and enhancing positive emotions.

9.1 What Are Emotions?

Suppose an extraterrestrial visitor asked you to explain emotions. How would you answer? You might start by saying that emotions are things that people feel. But this doesn't say much, for in turn you would probably describe feelings as synonymous with emotions. Social scientists generally agree that there are several components to the phenomena humans label as emotions (Lange & Zickfeld, 2021).

9.1.1 Physiological Changes

When you experience strong emotions, many bodily changes occur—universal sensations that do not vary with sex or culture (Volynets et al., 2020). For example, the physiological components of fear include increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, increased adrenaline secretions, elevated blood sugar, slowed digestion, and pupil dilation. Marriage researcher John Gottman (2014) notes that symptoms such as these occur when couples engage in intense conflicts. He calls the condition "flooding" and has found that it impedes effective problem solving.

Research supports the notion that humans experience emotions not just in the mind but throughout the body (Nummenmaa et al., 2014). As Figure 9.1 shows, disgust may turn your stomach, fear can tighten

your chest, and happiness can make you feel warm all over. Noticing physiological sensations such as these can offer a significant clue to your emotions.

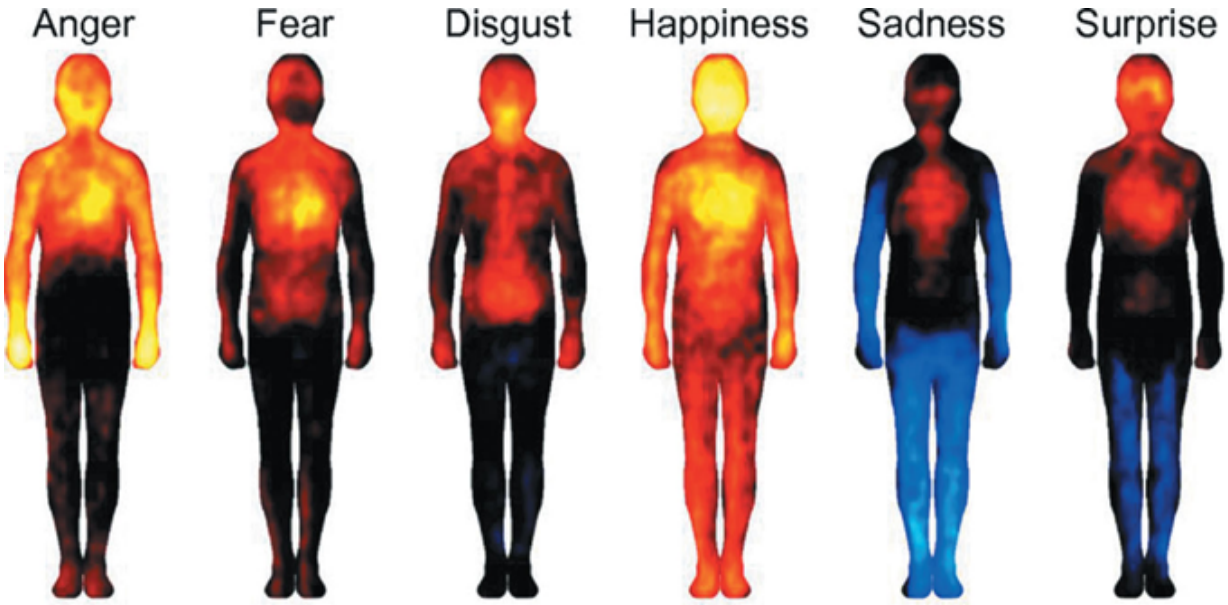


FIGURE 9.1 Physiological Changes from Emotions View larger image

There's a connection between emotions and physical health. Think of times when you've felt emotionally overwhelmed; you might recall being unusually tired or hungry then as well. Fitness buffs know how a good workout can release endorphins and clear the mind. One of the best ways to manage emotions is through a healthy diet, regular exercise, and a good night's sleep (Barrett, 2017). If you keep a balanced "body budget," you'll experience less emotional stress.

9.1.2 Nonverbal Behavior

Not all physical changes that accompany emotions are internal. Emotions are often apparent from observable physiological changes, such as blushing or perspiring. Other changes involve behavior: a distinctive facial expression, posture, gestures, different vocal tone and rate, and so on. These reactions can often be noticed and interpreted by others. Subjects who watched short videos of basketball and table tennis players could reliably determine from the players' nonverbal behavior alone whether the athletes were winning or losing, regardless of the subject's own experience with the sport (Furley & Schweizer, 2014).

Although it's reasonably easy to tell when someone is feeling a strong emotion, it's more difficult to be certain exactly what that emotion might be. A slumped posture and sigh may be a sign of sadness or possibly just fatigue. Likewise, widened eyes might indicate excitement or fear. As you learned in Chapter 7, nonverbal behavior is generally ambiguous and can easily be misread.

It's common to think of nonverbal behavior as the reaction to an emotional state, but there may be times when the reverse is true—when nonverbal behavior *causes* emotions. For instance, clenching your fists can help you feel stronger (Schubert & Koole, 2009), and walking with an upbeat strut can stave off feelings of depression (Michalak et al., 2015). (For more examples of nonverbal behaviors affecting emotions, see Section 7.3.3.) As behavioral scientists like to say, it can be easier to act yourself into new ways of feeling than to feel yourself into new ways of acting.

Nonverbal expressions of emotion are often interconnected with verbal ones. One study showed that participants who generated words associated with pride and disappointment experienced a change in posture (Oosterwijk et al., 2009). They unconsciously stood taller when talking about pride and slumped when using words for disappointment. The participants also experienced emotions associated with their words (e.g., feeling sad when speaking about disappointment).

9.1.3 Cognitive Interpretations

Chapter 5 explains that events only take on meaning when they're filtered through mental interpretations. For example, the physiological changes associated with fear are similar to those that accompany excitement, joy, and other emotions (Nummenmaa et al., 2014). In other words, based on physiological responses alone, it may be difficult to distinguish between trembling with fear and quivering with excitement. Sometimes it's a matter of interpretation and labeling.

Researchers found that some successful athletes experiencing pre-competition stress labeled their feelings in positive emotional terms ("I'm pumped and ready to go"), which helped their performance (Mallalieu et al., 2003). The same holds true for emotion interpretation before public speaking: Telling yourself "I am excited" rather than "Calm down" will generally lead to a more successful presentation (Brooks, 2013). (See Watch and Discuss 9.1.) As the old

adage goes, you may not be able to get rid of butterflies in your stomach, but you can get them to fly in formation.

Watch and Discuss 9.1: "How to Turn Anxiety into Excitement"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Describe how *cognitive reappraisal* can help change your emotional responses in stressful situations.
2. Try this approach the next time you're feeling anxious and report to others whether it helped.

Some researchers have concluded that the experiences of fright, joy, or anger come primarily from the labels—and the accompanying cognitive interpretations—people give to their physical symptoms (Kagan, 2007). Psychologist Philip Zimbardo (1977) offers a good example of this principle:

> I notice I'm perspiring while lecturing. From that I infer I am nervous. If it occurs often, I might even label myself a "nervous person." Once I have the label, the next question I must answer is "Why am I nervous?" Then I start to search for an appropriate explanation. I might notice some students leaving the room, or being inattentive. I am nervous because I'm not giving a good lecture. That makes me nervous. How do I know it's not good? Because I'm boring my audience. I am nervous because I am a boring lecturer and I want to be a good lecturer. I feel inadequate.

> Maybe I should open a delicatessen instead. Just then a student says, "It's hot in here, I'm perspiring and it makes it tough to concentrate on your lecture." Instantly, I'm no longer "nervous" or "boring." (p. 53)

Social scientists refer to this process as **reappraisal**—rethinking the meaning of emotionally charged events in ways that alter their emotional impact (Shapero et al., 2019). Research shows that reappraisal is vastly superior to suppressing feelings: It often leads to lower stress and increased productivity (Wallace et al., 2009). Reappraisal has both psychological and physiological benefits (Beames et al., 2019), regardless of a person's age or culture (Wang et al., 2021).

Reappraisal also has relational benefits (Jones et al., 2017). One study found that couples who regularly step back from their conflicts and reappraise them from a neutral perspective have higher levels of relational satisfaction (Finkel et al., 2013). In essence, these couples reduce the emotional impact of their disputes by looking at them rationally and dispassionately. You'll walk through the reappraisal process later in this chapter when you read about how to dispute irrational beliefs.

9.1.4 Verbal Expression

Chapter 7 describes the many ways emotions are expressed nonverbally. But sometimes words are necessary to express feelings. Saying "I'm really angry" is clearer and more helpful than stomping out of the room, and "I'm feeling nervous" might help explain a pained expression on your face. Leaving emotions unspoken can be

personally and interpersonally harmful (Chervonsky & Hunt, 2017). Putting them into words—sometimes referred to as *affect labeling*—can help you manage them more effectively (Fan et al., 2019).

Many researchers believe there are several "basic" or "primary" emotions (Katzir & Eyal, 2013; Phillips & Slessor, 2011). However, there isn't total agreement among scholars about what those emotions are or what makes them "basic" (Tracy & Randles, 2011). Moreover, emotions that are primary in one culture may not be primary in others, and some emotions may have no equivalent in other cultures (Pogosyan, 2018). Despite this debate, most scholars acknowledge that *anger*, *joy*, *fear*, *sadness*, and *disgust* are common and typical human emotions (Shen et al., 2022).

Humans experience most emotions with different degrees of intensity—and they use specific emotion words to represent these differences. Figure 9.2 illustrates this point. To say you're "annoyed" when a friend breaks an important promise, for example, would probably be an understatement. In other cases, people chronically overstate the strength of their feelings, saying that everything is either "wonderful" or "terrible." The problem with this sort of exaggeration is that when a truly intense emotion comes along, there are no words left to describe it adequately. If chocolate chip cookies from the local bakery are "fantastic," how does it feel to fall in love?

FIGURE 9.2 Intensity of Emotions View larger image

9.2 Influences on Emotional Expression

Humans are born with the disposition to reveal their emotions, at least nonverbally. Babies smile, frown, giggle, and cry whenever the mood strikes them. But over time, a wide range of differences develops in emotional expression. The following pages describe some influences that shape how people communicate their feelings.

9.2.1 Culture

Although people around the world experience the same emotions, the same events can generate quite different feelings in different cultures. The notion of eating snails might bring a smile of delight to some residents of France, although it would cause many North Americans to grimace in disgust. Culture also has an effect on how emotions are valued and promoted. One study (Lim, 2016) found that collectivist Asian cultures value "low arousal positive affect" such as being calm, relaxed, and peaceful. European Americans, by contrast, tend to value "high arousal positive affect" such as excitement, enthusiasm, and elation. More specifically, communication researcher Christina Kotchemidova (2010) notes that the United States is known internationally as a "culture of

cheerfulness." She cites a Polish author who describes U.S. expressiveness this way: "Wow! Great! How nice! That's fantastic! I had a terrific time! It was wonderful! Have a nice day! Americans. So damned cheerful."

One of the most significant factors influencing emotional expression is the position of a culture on the individualism–collectivism spectrum (Halberstadt & Lozada, 2011). Members of collectivistic cultures, such as Japan and India, prize harmony among members of their "in-group" and discourage expression of any negative emotions that might upset relationships among people who belong to it. By contrast, members of highly individualistic cultures, such as the United States and Canada, feel comfortable revealing their feelings to people with whom they are close. Individualists and collectivists also handle emotional expression with members of out-groups differently. Whereas individualists are quite frank about expressing negative emotions toward outsiders, collectivists are more likely to hide emotions such as disliking (Ting-Toomey, 2017). It's easy to see how differences in display rules can lead to communication problems.

The phrase "I love you" offers an interesting case study of cultural differences in emotion expression. Researchers found that Americans say "I love you" more frequently (and to more people) than do members of most other cultures (Gareis & Wilkins, 2011). It's not that love isn't a universal experience; rather, there are significant cultural differences about when, where, how often, and with whom the phrase should be used. For instance, Middle Easterners in the study said that "I love you" should be expressed

only between spouses, and they warned that American men who use the phrase cavalierly with Middle Eastern women might be misinterpreted as making a marriage proposal. They were not alone; study participants from a variety of backgrounds (e.g., Eastern Europe, India, Korea) said they use the phrase quite sparingly, believing that its power and meaning would be lost if used too often. However, one factor was consistent across cultures: Women tend to say "I love you" more often than men (although men tend to say it first—Watkins et al., 2022). For more examples of the effect that gender has on emotion expression, read on.

"If I were a car, you could find the words."

9.2.2 Gender

Despite persistent stereotypes about the different effects of hormones on the sexes, adult males are just as emotional as adult females (Weigard et al., 2021). Still, socialization into gender roles can shape the ways in which men and women experience and express their emotions (Lee et al., 2013). For example, research suggests that, in general, women are faster than men at recognizing emotions from facial cues (Hampson et al., 2006); are better at judging emotions from eye behavior (Kirkland et al., 2013); and are more stimulated by emotional data and remember them better than men do (Spalek et al., 2015).

Research on emotional expression suggests that there is also some truth to the cultural stereotype of the inexpressive man and the more demonstrative woman (May, 2017). According to the American Survey Center (Cox, 2021), 48 percent of women reported privately sharing personal feelings with a friend in the previous week, compared to less than 30 percent of men. Similarly, 41 percent of women said they received emotional support from a friend that week, compared to 21 percent of men. And about half the women told a friend they love them—twice that of the men in the survey.

Men are more likely to experience what scholars call *alexithymia*—a difficulty in identifying and talking about feelings, which can lead to relational challenges (Hesse et al., 2012, 2015). And suppression of emotion by husbands is a strong predictor of dissatisfaction and discord in the early years of heterosexual marriage (Velotti et al., 2016). It's not surprising, then, that psychologists and social

commentators recommend that boys and men be encouraged to express their feelings in open and constructive ways (Pollack, 2006; Reiner, 2016). Opening up tends to be easier for men in online anonymous settings, particularly when seeking help with relationships or heartache (Entwistle et al., 2021).

In heterosexual romantic relationships, women often take responsibility for the "emotion work" of the couple, looking out for the emotional well-being of their partners (Home & Johnson, 2019). For instance, women are more likely to ask, "How are you feeling?" or "Are you doing okay?" Another study found that women in lesbian or straight relationships were more focused on the emotional needs of their partners than were men in gay or straight couples (Umberson et al., 2015).

The point is, although men and women generally experience the same emotions, there are some significant differences in the ways they read and express them (Brody & Hall, 2008). These differences are due in large measure to social conventions, which we discuss now.

9.2.3 Social Conventions and Roles

In mainstream U.S. society, the unwritten rules of communication discourage the direct verbal expression of most emotions (Beck, 2015b). Count the number of genuine emotional expressions you hear over a 2- or 3-day period ("I'm angry"; "I feel embarrassed") and you'll discover that such expressions are rare. People are

generally comfortable making statements of fact and often delight in expressing their opinions, but they rarely disclose how they feel. They tend to *act* out rather than *talk* out their emotions.

Not surprisingly, the emotions that people do share directly are usually positive ("I'm happy to say …"; "I really enjoyed …"). Americans in particular avoid acknowledging negative emotions ("Don't cry"; "Nothing to get upset about") in almost every context, including child rearing, the workplace, and personal relationships (Kotchemidova, 2010). This is despite the fact that across cultures, emotion suppression has been shown to have negative effects on psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Kwon & Kim, 2019).

This isn't to suggest that restricting emotion expression is always a bad idea. Researchers use the term **emotional labor** to describe situations in which managing and even suppressing emotions are both appropriate and necessary (Butler & Modaff, 2012). Studies show that emotional labor is an important component of many if not most occupations (see the At Work box in this section for specific examples). It can also be a component of communication with family and friends. For instance, many adult children engage in emotional labor with their parents, suppressing difficult feelings in order to keep family interactions peaceful (Schrodt, 2020).

@WORK

Emotional Labor on the Job

The rules for expressing emotions in the workplace are clearly different from those in personal life. In intimate relationships (at least in mainstream Western culture), it's often important to tell friends, family, and loved ones how you feel. In the workplace, however, it can be just as important to *conceal* emotions for the sake of clients, customers, coworkers, and supervisors—and also to protect your job (Redden & Scarduzio, 2018).

Emotional labor—the process of managing and sometimes suppressing emotions—has been studied in a variety of occupational contexts. Here are a few examples:

- The nursing profession can be interpersonally demanding. Emergency nurses, for example, feel like "they're on show all the time" (Kirk et al., 2022). And mental health nurses lament "running on emotional empty" (Delgado et al., 2022). Many report that it's difficult to meet their patients' emotional needs while concealing their own.
- Journalists say it's tough to keep their feelings in check when covering a natural disaster because "the emotional burden is high and the energy to cope is low" (Dworznik-Hoak, 2022). They try to keep their cool not only to appear professional, but also to maintain a sense of objectivity in their reporting.
- Teachers routinely engage in emotional labor in their interactions with students—and that increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instructors experienced a disconnect "between trying to reassure

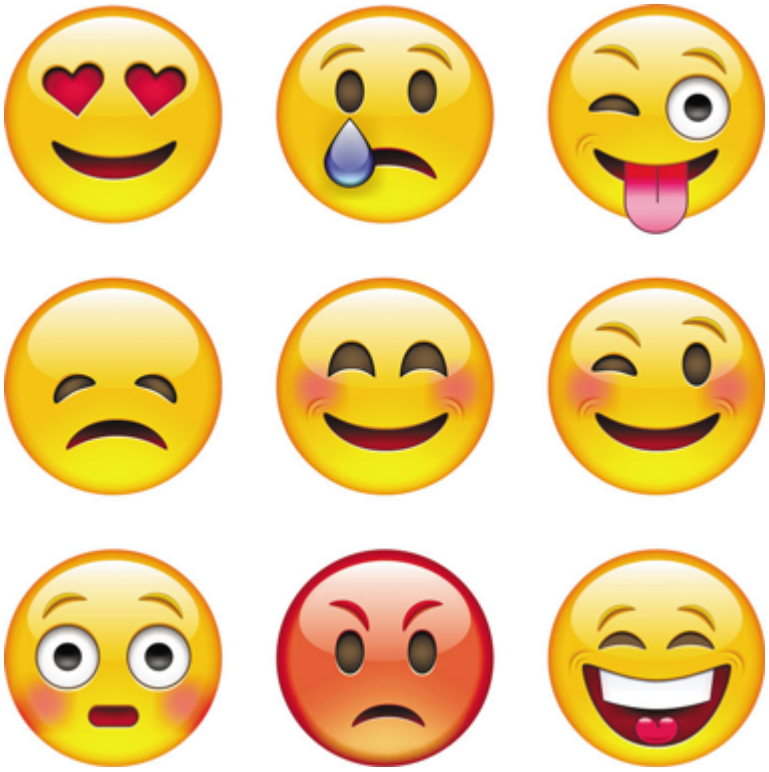
and support students while they themselves felt sad and anxious" (Auger & Formentin, 2021).

Most customer-service positions require working with people who may express their dissatisfaction in angry and inappropriate ways ("I hate this store—I'm never shopping here again!"). In situations like these, it's unprofessional to say what you truly feel ("Don't let the door hit you on the way out"). Instead, competent on-the-job communicators can use the listening, conflict-management, and defense-reducing skills described in Chapters 8, 12, and 13. And they should find ways to appropriately vent emotion with trusted coworkers, friends, or maybe a therapist.

It's not always easy to manage emotions, especially when you're feeling fearful, stressed, angry, or defensive. Nevertheless, dealing effectively with emotional labor is vital to avoid burnout and succeed on the job (Riforgiate et al., 2022).

9.2.4 Mediated Communication

Communicators generally express more emotion online than they do in person (Derks et al., 2008). In some cases, that's good news. People who have trouble sharing feelings face to face may find a freedom to do so behind the safety of a screen (Sifferlin, 2014). Consider how it might be easier to type, rather than say, the words "I'm embarrassed," "I'm angry," or "I love you."



However, digital messages often fail to clearly convey the sender's feelings. Even friends and family have difficulty accurately interpreting the feelings behind texted messages (Riordan & Trichtinger, 2017). Enter emoticons :<) and emojis 🙂. As noted in Section 7.2.4, these symbols can supply important emotional information. Emojis also supply it quickly—readers process them much faster than words that express emotion (Kaye et al., 2021). And positive emojis enhance communication by conveying the warmth of the message sender (Boutet et al. 2021). In informal and personal messages, emojis can help clarify feelings. After all, a smiley face could be a relationship saver if you jokingly type, "I'm thinking of moving out."

Because most people want to show their best side, social media posts are more likely to express positive emotions than negative ones

(Waterloo et al., 2018). That's in keeping with principles of social desirability and impression management. Negative emotions are more likely to be expressed in private encounters than in public ones. You may have seen friends or family venting at each other on social networking sites and thought, "You need to take this offline."

Social media can spark new emotions as well as express them. For instance, regularly checking a romantic partner's social networking sites may spur feelings of jealousy, contributing to relational dissatisfaction (Dainton & Stokes, 2015). Jealousy resulting from social media posts is especially strong when the viewer is already suspicious, and generally more so for women than men (Muise et al., 2014). Even old pictures on Instagram can evoke feelings of retroactive jealousy by reminding people of their partner's past romances (Frampton & Fox, 2018). This has led to a spirited debate whether it's best to delete, archive, or retain photos of exes on social networking sites (Hall, 2018).

The bottom line is that both senders and receivers may experience emotions more intensely online. It's wise to keep this in mind before hitting "send" on emotionally charged messages and before jumping to conclusions about ambiguous online information.

9.2.5 Emotional Contagion

Emotions can spread from one person to another through a process known as **emotional contagion** (Flora, 2019). As Daniel Goleman (1995) observes, "We catch feelings from one another as though they

were some kind of social virus." If your friend laughs at a funny video, you're likely to laugh too (Weber & Quiring, 2019). In video lectures, happy instructors, either human or virtual, make for happier and more motivated students (Horovitz & Mayer, 2021). You can probably recall instances in which being around a calm person left you feeling more at peace, or when your previously sunny mood was spoiled by contact with a grouch. That's the power of emotional contagion.

Watch and Discuss 9.2: "When Emotions Are Contagious"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Describe how *emotional contagion* is communicated interpersonally.
2. Discuss which emotions you find most contagious and why.

This process can take place online as well as in person. In an analysis of millions of status updates on Facebook, researchers found that posts about rain—which typically correlate with negative moods—can have a ripple effect on readers (Coviello et al., 2014). Those exposed to their friends' rainy-day messages began posting more emotionally

negative updates, even if it wasn't raining in their area. The good news is that positive posts are contagious too—at even greater rates. The researchers found that every positive status update led to 1.75 new positive posts by followers. Twitter updates can have similar effects (Ferrara & Yang, 2015).

It's important to recognize that communicating your emotional state—even online with people who may not know you well—can have an impact on the feelings and moods of others. And if checking others' posts leaves you feeling anxious and depressed (Lin et al., 2016), it might be a good time to take a break from social media.

9.3 Expressing Emotions Effectively

A wide range of research supports the value of expressing emotions appropriately. Starting at a young age, the way parents talk to their children about emotions has a powerful effect on development. John Gottman identified two distinct parenting styles: "emotion coaching" and "emotion dismissing" (Lee, 2017). Research shows how the coaching approach gives children life skills for communicating about feelings, leading to much more satisfying relationships. In fact, children who grow up in families where parents dismiss emotions are at higher risk for behavior problems than those who are raised in families that practice emotion coaching (Young, 2009). Parents also enjoy more satisfying relationships with their adult children if they remain active listeners open to discussion of a variety of emotions (LaFreniere, 2022).

At the most basic physiological level, people who know how to share their feelings appropriately are healthier than those who don't. Inexpressive people—those who avoid their feelings and impulses and deny distress—are more likely to suffer from a host of medical ailments (Quartana & Burns, 2010). However, people who are overly expressive also suffer physiologically. Even one five-minute episode of anger is so stressful that it can impair your immune system for

more than six hours (Thaik, 2014). One key to health, then, is to learn how to express emotions *constructively*.

The suggestions that follow can help you decide when and how to express your emotions. Combined with the guidelines for self-disclosure in Chapter 4, they can improve the effectiveness of your emotional expression.

9.3.1 Recognize Your Feelings

Answering the question "How do you feel?" isn't as easy for some people as for others (Young, 2018). Communication researchers Melanie Booth-Butterfield and Steven Booth-Butterfield (1998; see also Samter & Burleson, 2005) found that some people (whom they term "affectively oriented") are much more aware of their own emotional states. Such affectively oriented people use this awareness when making important decisions. By contrast, people with a low affective orientation are usually unaware of their emotions and tend to regard feelings as useless, unimportant information. The researchers summarize studies showing a relationship between awareness of feelings and a wide range of valuable traits, including positive relationships between parents and children, the ability to comfort others, sensitivity to nonverbal cues, and even skillful use of humor. In other words, being aware of one's feelings is an important ingredient in skillful communication.

Beyond being *aware* of one's feelings, research shows that it's valuable to be able to specifically *identify* one's emotions. Teaching

children to recognize and label their emotions ("Are you mad or sad?") is foundational to building their emotional intelligence (David, 2016). College students who could pinpoint the negative emotions they experienced (such as "nervous," "angry," "sad," "ashamed," and "guilty") also had the best strategies for managing those emotions (Barrett et al., 2001). As the Focus on Research in this section notes, putting your feelings into words is fundamental to regulating your emotions (Torre & Lieberman, 2018).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Use Your Words

Lisa Feldman Barrett has spent her career studying emotions. She maintains that humans aren't hardwired with a universal set of feelings. Rather, we construct emotions through an interplay of brain, body, and culture. Barrett details this process in her groundbreaking book, *How Emotions Are Made.*

Language can play a key role in managing emotions. The familiar parental advice to "use your words" is on target, says Barrett. It's better to say "I'm sad" than to pout in the corner. It's healthier to say "I'm scared" than to leave that emotion unstated. Putting feelings into words promotes self-understanding, and it helps others make sense of your behavior.

Barrett believes it's also important to develop *granularity* in emotion descriptions. There are shades of difference between *discouraged* and *dejected*; between *blissful* and *ecstatic*. Studies show that people with higher emotional granularity make fewer visits to doctors and hospitals than those whose

language is limited to *sad* and *glad*. Expanding your emotional vocabulary is good for your health.

In short, Barrett subscribes to the notion that words create worlds—especially when it comes to understanding and managing emotions.

Barrett, L. F. (2017). *How emotions are made: The secret life of the brain.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

As you read earlier in this chapter, there are a number of ways in which feelings become recognizable. Physiological changes can be a clear sign of your emotional state. Monitoring nonverbal behaviors is another excellent way to keep in touch with your feelings. You can also recognize your emotions by monitoring your thoughts as well as the verbal messages you send to others. It's not far from stating "I hate this!" to realizing that you're angry (or bored, nervous, or embarrassed).

9.3.2 Choose the Best Language

Take a moment now and see how many feelings you can write down. Try to go beyond the simple emotions of sad, glad, and mad. After you've done your best, look at Figure 9.3 and see which ones you might add from this admittedly small set of emotion words.

FIGURE 9.3 Emotion Words View larger image

Many communicators think they are expressing feelings when, in fact, their statements are emotionally counterfeit (Hall, 2013). For example, it sounds emotionally revealing to say "I feel like going to a show" or "I feel we've been seeing too much of each other." But in fact, neither of these statements has any emotional content. In the first sentence, the word *feel* really stands for an intention: "I *want* to go to a show." In the second sentence, the "feeling" is really a thought: "I *think* we've been seeing too much of each other." You can recognize the absence of emotion in each case by adding a genuine word of feeling to it. For instance, "I'm *bored* and I want to go to a show" or "I think we've been seeing too much of each other and I feel *confined*."

You can improve emotional expression by making it clear that your feeling is centered on a specific set of circumstances rather than the

whole relationship. Instead of saying “I resent you,” say “I get resentful when you don’t keep your promises.” Rather than “I’m bored with you,” say “I get bored when you talk about money.”

9.3.3 Share Multiple Feelings

Sharing multiple emotions can be a challenging task. While you are usually aware of your most basic and initial response to an event, complex and delayed reactions are more difficult to identify and express. These include blended feelings or even feelings about your initial feelings, what scholars call *meta-emotions* (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2019). Untangling these emotional knots is hard work but worth the effort if you want to know yourself—and have others know you—better.

Consider the following examples. For each one, ask yourself two questions: How would I feel? What feelings might I express?

- A friend has posted a photo of you online, along with a positive message. On one hand, you’re flattered by the display of affection. On the other hand, it’s a picture that doesn’t paint you in the best light. You wish the friend had asked first.
- Out-of-town friends have promised to arrive at your house at six o’clock. When your guests are still a no-show at nine o’clock, you are convinced that a terrible accident has occurred. Just as you pick up the phone to contact the police

and local hospitals, your friends breeze in the door with an offhand remark about getting a late start.

Situations such as these would likely elicit several emotions. The oversharing friend's post would probably leave you pleased, embarrassed, and angry—all at the same time. What about the overdue friends? Their arrival would initially be greeted with relief—"I'm so glad they're safe!" You would also likely feel a blend of surprise and anger, however, and frustration at their thoughtlessness—"I can't believe they didn't care enough to text or call about running late." Then a meta-emotion might surface—guilt, for example, about getting mad in the first place: "I'm a bad friend for overreacting. I've been late before too."

Despite it being commonplace to experience several emotions at the same time (Carofiglio et al., 2008), it's typical to communicate only one feeling—usually, the most negative one. In both of the preceding examples you might show only your anger, leaving your friends with little idea of the full range of your feelings. Imagine the self-awareness you may gain and the different reactions you may receive if you identified and described *all* your emotions. And it's often best to lead with the more positive emotion ("I appreciated your upbeat post"; "I'm so relieved that you're okay") so as not to put friends on the defensive.

9.3.4 Recognize the Difference Between Feeling and Acting

Just because you feel a certain way doesn't mean you must always act on it. In fact, there is compelling evidence that people who act out angry feelings—even by hitting an inanimate punching bag—actually feel worse than those who experience anger without lashing out (Lerner, 2005). Posting your frustration on online "rant sites" doesn't help, either (Martin et al., 2013). More to the point of this book, researchers have discovered that people who deal with

negative feelings by venting them indiscriminately have above-average levels of anxiety in their interpersonal relationships (Jerome & Liss, 2005).

Getting in touch with certain emotions does not commit you to a course of action, but it can help you decide how best to act. If, for instance, you think, "I'm so nervous about the interview that I want to cancel it and pretend that I'm sick," it becomes possible to explore why you feel so anxious and then work to remedy the problem. Pretending that nothing is the matter, on the other hand, will do nothing to diminish your anxiety, which can then block your chances for success.

9.3.5 Accept Responsibility for Your Feelings

Others don't *make* you like or dislike them, and believing that they do denies the responsibility you have for your own emotions. It's important to make sure that your emotional expressions don't blame others for the way you feel (Heitler, 2013). The "I" language described in Chapter 6 makes it clear that you own your feelings. For example, instead of saying, "You're making me angry," it's more accurate to say, "I'm feeling angry." Instead of "You hurt my feelings," a more responsible statement is, "I feel hurt when you do that."

9.3.6 Choose the Best Time and Place to Express Your Feelings

Often the first flush of a strong feeling is not the best time to speak out (Gallo, 2017). If you're awakened by the racket caused by a noisy neighbor, storming over to complain might result in your saying things you'll regret later. In such a case, it's probably wiser to wait until you have thought out carefully how you might express your feelings in a way that would be most likely to be heard.

Even after you've waited for your initial emotion to subside, it's still important to choose the time that's best suited to the message. Being rushed or tired or disturbed by some other matter is probably a good reason for postponing the expression of your feeling.

In the same manner, you ought to be sure that the recipient of your message is ready to hear you out before you begin. Sometimes that means checking the other person's mood before you start sharing emotions. In other cases, it's about calculating whether that person is ready to hear sentiments such as "I love you." But don't put off expressing emotions too long. It turns out that the old adage, "Never go to bed angry," has scientific validity (Devlin, 2016). During sleep, the brain reorganizes the way negative memories are stored. If you go to bed mad, you'll likely have trouble shaking that anger the next morning. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for an ethical challenge on this topic.)

There are also cases in which you may choose never to express your feelings. Even if you're dying to tell an instructor that the lectures

leave you bored senseless, you might decide it's best to answer the professor's question "How's class going?" with an innocuous "Okay." And even though you may be irritated by an arrogant police officer who stops you for speeding, the smartest approach might be to keep your feelings to yourself.

When you experience strong emotions but don't want to share them verbally (for whatever reason), writing out your feelings and thoughts has been shown to have mental, physical, and emotional benefits (Pennebaker, 2018). That's true for positive feelings as well as difficult ones. Savoring communication experiences by reminiscing about them in writing can increase your sense of well-being (Jiao et al., 2021). This demonstrates once again the link between emotions and communication. The cognitive process of turning feelings into language helps manage the emotions. (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter to build your skill in identifying and expressing your feelings.)

9.4 Managing Emotions

The preceding section described how to express your emotions constructively. But there will probably be times when you decide it's best to keep your feelings to yourself. For example, imagine that during class your professor makes an offhand comment that leaves you feeling embarrassed. You might not be comfortable saying, "That hurt my feelings." Likewise, in a job interview, you probably wouldn't do yourself any favors by confessing your nervousness.

The following sections describe how to manage your emotions *intrapersonally*—that is, through your own thought process. The starting point is learning to differentiate beneficial emotions from the less helpful kind.

9.4.1 Facilitative and Debilitative Emotions

Not all emotions are beneficial. For instance, depression, terror, and irrational guilt do little to help you feel better or improve your relationships. It's important to distinguish **facilitative emotions**, which contribute to effective functioning, from **debilitative emotions**, which hinder or prevent effective performance. Emotions such as joy and love are obviously facilitative. Much of the time, emotions such as anger or fear are debilitative.

Some unpleasant emotions can be useful if they aren't too intense. For instance, a certain amount of anger or irritation can be constructive if it motivates you to make a bad situation better. But when anger turns to rage, things usually turn out badly. The same is true for fear. A little bit of nervousness before a job interview may boost you just enough to improve your performance (mellow athletes or actors usually don't do well), but a job candidate who is inordinately anxious isn't likely to impress potential employers. One big difference, then, between facilitative and debilitative emotions is their *intensity*.

A second characteristic of debilitative feelings is their extended *duration*. Feeling sad after the breakup of a relationship or the loss of a job is to be expected. Yet spending the rest of one's life grieving over the loss accomplishes nothing. In the same way, staying angry at someone for a wrong inflicted long ago can be just as punishing to the grudge holder as to the wrongdoer. Social scientists call this **rumination**—recurrent thoughts not demanded by the immediate environment. A substantial body of research confirms that rumination increases feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression and makes them last longer (Verduyn & Lavrijsen, 2015). Jealousy and rumination are a particularly bad mix (Elphinston et al., 2013), often leading to unhealthy relational behaviors such as surveillance and stalking.

9.4.2 Thoughts Cause Feelings

How can you minimize debilitative feelings? One way is known as the *rational-emotive* approach (Ellis & Ellis, 2014). This method is based on the idea that the key to changing feelings is to change unproductive cognitive interpretations.

Emotions might seem to have a life of their own. People wish they could feel calm when approaching strangers, yet their voices quiver. They try to appear confident when asking for a raise, but their eyes twitch nervously. Many people would say that the strangers or the boss *makes* them feel nervous, just as they would say that a bee sting causes them to feel pain:

Activating Event	**Consequence**
bee sting	physical pain
meeting strangers	nervous feelings

When looking at emotions in this way, people may believe they have little control over how they feel. However, the causal relationship between activating events and emotional discomfort (or pleasure) isn't as great as it seems. Cognitive psychologists and therapists argue that it is not events, such as meeting strangers or being jilted by a lover, that cause people to feel poorly but rather the *beliefs they hold* about these events.

Consider this example to understand how thoughts cause feelings. Imagine you start receiving a string of angry, insulting messages from a friend. Under the circumstances, it's likely that you would feel hurt and upset. Now imagine that, after receiving the offensive messages, you learn that your friend had been hospitalized for. In this case, your reaction would probably be quite different. Most likely, you'd feel sorrow and compassion, and possibly embarrassment for ever imagining a good friend would turn against you so quickly and for no apparent reason.

In this story, the activating event—being called names—was the same in both cases, yet the emotional consequences were very different. The reason for the different feelings has to do with the pattern of thinking in each case. In the first instance, you would most likely think that your friend was angry with you and that you must have done something terrible to deserve such a response. In the second case, you would probably feel sympathetic given that your friend had experienced some psychological difficulty. This example illustrates that people's *interpretations* of events determine their feelings:

Activating Event	**Thought or Belief**	**Consequences**
being called names	"I've done something wrong."	hurt, upset
being called names	"My friend must be sick."	pity, sympathy

The same principle applies in more common situations. For example, the words “I love you” can be interpreted in a variety of ways. They could be taken at face value as a genuine expression of deep affection. They might also be decoded in a variety of other ways: for example, as an attempt at manipulation; a sincere but mistaken declaration uttered in a moment of passion; or an attempt to make the recipient feel better. It’s easy to imagine how different interpretations of a statement such as “I love you” can lead to different emotional reactions:

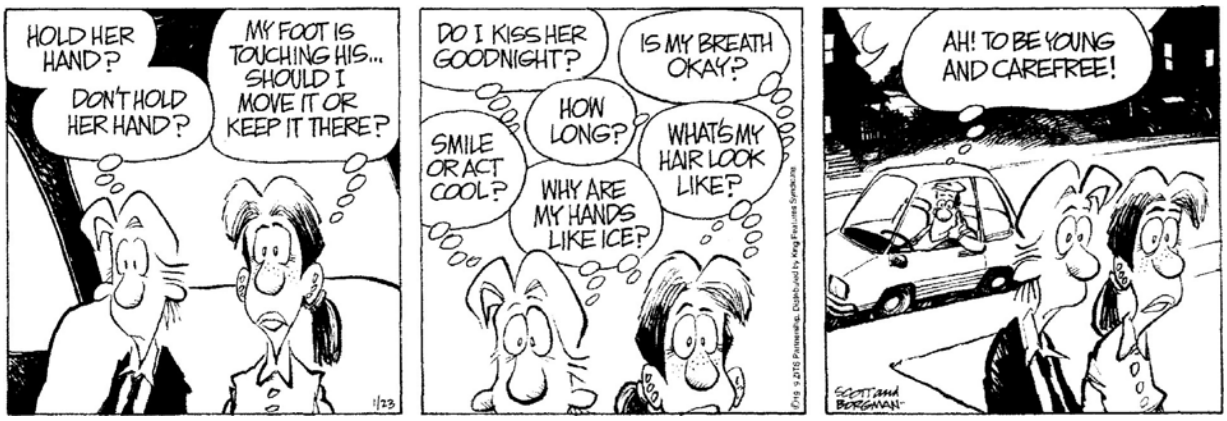
Event	Thought	Feeling
hearing “I love you”	“This is a genuine statement.”	delight (perhaps)
hearing “I love you”	“They’re just saying this to manipulate me.”	anger

The key, then, to understanding and changing feelings lies in reappraising the event. This takes place through a form of intrapersonal communication professionals label **self-talk** (Fernyhough, 2016; Van Raalte et al., 2016)—the nonvocal, internal monologue that is your process of thinking. To understand how self-talk works, pay attention to the part of you that, like a little voice, whispers in your ear. Take a moment now and listen to what the voice is saying.

Did you hear the voice? It was quite possibly saying, “What little voice? I don’t hear any voices!” This little voice talks to you almost constantly:

> “I wonder when this salesperson is going to stop talking.”
>
> “I’d better get moving or I’m going to be late.”
>
> “How rude of that customer to cut in line!”

At work or at play, while browsing the web or brushing your teeth, you talk to yourself. This thinking voice rarely stops. It may fall silent for a while when you’re meditating or concentrating on a task, but most of the time it rattles on. Let’s look now at how that voice sometimes processes thoughts in ways that need reappraising.


HOLD HER HAND?
DON'T HOLD HER HAND?
MY FOOT IS TOUCHING HIS... SHOULD I MOVE IT OR KEEP IT THERE?
DO I KISS HER GOODNIGHT?
IS MY BREATH OKAY?
HOW LONG?
SMILE OR ACT COOL?
WHY ARE MY HANDS LIKE ICE?
WHAT'S MY HAIR LOOK LIKE?
AH! TO BE YOUNG AND CAREFREE!
SCOTT and BERGMAN

9.4.3 Irrational Thinking and Debilitative Emotions

This process of self-talk is essential to understanding the debilitative feelings that interfere with effective communication. Many

debilitative feelings come from accepting a number of irrational thoughts—or *fallacies*—that lead to illogical conclusions and, in turn, to debilitating feelings (Samar et al., 2013). Most people usually aren't aware of these thoughts, which makes them especially powerful.

The Fallacy of Perfection

People who accept the **fallacy of perfection** believe that a worthwhile communicator should be able to handle any situation with complete confidence and skill (Lo & Abbott, 2019). Although such a standard of perfection can serve as a goal and a source of inspiration (rather like making a hole in one for a golfer), it's unrealistic to expect that you can reach or maintain this level of behavior. The truth is, people simply aren't perfect.

People who believe that it's desirable and possible to be a perfect communicator come to think that others won't appreciate them if they are imperfect. Admitting mistakes, saying "I don't know," or sharing feelings of uncertainty or discomfort thus seem to be social defects. But you know that's not accurate, because you don't like being around know-it-alls who never acknowledge that they're fallible.

You become more liberated each time you comfortably accept the idea that you are not perfect. Saying to yourself, "I made a mistake—I'm a failure" will likely lead to debilitative emotions. Replacing that with, "I made a mistake—I guess I'm human, and I learned something from it" is far more facilitating.

The Fallacy of Approval

Another mistaken belief is based on the idea that it is vital—not just desirable—to obtain everyone's approval. Communicators who subscribe to the **fallacy of approval** go to incredible lengths to seek acceptance from others, even to the extent of sacrificing their own principles and happiness. Adherence to this irrational myth can lead to some ludicrous situations, such as feeling nervous because people you really don't like seem to disapprove of you, or feeling apologetic when you are not at fault.

Consider how some self-talk is rooted in the fallacy of approval, and how realistic alternatives can lead to more facilitative emotions:

Fallacious approval seeking:

> "If I speak up about a confusing exam question, the instructor will probably think I didn't study hard enough."

Rational:

> "I hope the instructor doesn't think I didn't study hard enough, but I'd rather speak up about a confusing exam question than not have it clarified."

Fallacious approval seeking:

> "If I confront my teammate about not doing his share, he'll probably get defensive."

Rational:

> "There's a chance my teammate will get defensive—but I'd rather deal with that than keep quiet and feel resentful."

Don't misunderstand: Abandoning the fallacy of approval doesn't mean living a life of selfishness. It's still important to consider the needs of others. It's also pleasant—one might even say necessary—to strive for the respect of certain people. The point is that if you must abandon your own needs and principles to gain this acceptance, the price is too high.

The Fallacy of Should

One source of unhappiness is the inability to distinguish between what *is* and what *should be*, or the **fallacy of should**. For instance, imagine a person who is full of complaints about the world:

> "There should be no rain on weekends."
>
> "Money should grow on trees."
>
> "We should all be able to fly."

Beliefs like these are obviously foolish. But people hold those kinds of expectations for others all the time:

> "She shouldn't be so inconsiderate."
>
> "He should stand up for himself."
>
> "They should work harder."

You probably hold similar expectations for yourself. Read these aloud and consider how you *feel* about them (your tone of voice will give you a clue):

> "I should be more outgoing."
>
> "I should be nicer to my family."
>
> "I should be a better team player."

Even when they're true, "shoulds" generate a lot of emotional baggage. Rather than expecting others to behave the way you think they should and feeling disappointed when they don't meet that standard, it's more realistic to think, "I *wish* they would behave the way I want—but maybe I'm being unrealistic to expect better behavior."

The same principle applies to self-imposed resolutions: They can be unrealistic and create more problems than they solve. It can be more productive to set goals rather than dwell on self-criticism. Consider these alternatives to the preceding list:

> "I wish I were more extroverted, but I'm not. I will do the best I can without being a phony."
>
> "I'm going to start being nicer to my family."
>
> "I'll resist being selfish and work on being a better team player."

The Fallacy of Overgeneralization

The **fallacy of overgeneralization** occurs when a person bases a belief on a *limited amount of evidence*. Consider the following statements:

> "I blanked during that speech. I'm so stupid!"
>
> "Some friend I am! I forgot my best friend's birthday."

These examples focus on a single shortcoming as if it represents everything. It's more rational and less punishing to avoid overgeneralizing. A single memory lapse can be the exception rather

than the rule, and forgetting one event doesn't make you a bad friend.

A second, related category of overgeneralization occurs when we *exaggerate shortcomings*:

> "They *never* listen to me."
>
> "They're *always* criticizing me."
>
> "I can't think of *anything*."

On closer examination, such absolute statements are almost always false and usually lead to discouragement or anger. In fact, the use of "absolutist" words such as *never* and *always* is associated with anxiety, depression, and even suicide (Al-Mosaiwi & Johnstone, 2018). It's better to replace overgeneralizations with more accurate messages, which are likely to generate less negative feelings:

> "They sometimes don't hear me out."
>
> "They've been critical three times I can remember this week."
>
> "I haven't had any ideas I like today."

The Fallacy of Causation

People who live their lives in accordance with the **fallacy of causation** believe they should do nothing that can hurt or in any way inconvenience others because it will cause undesirable feelings. For example, you might not tell your family members that they've interrupted you several times because you don't want to make them

angry. Similarly, it might be tempting to avoid bringing up issues with friends and coworkers because you don't want to cause a negative reaction.

A reluctance to speak out in such situations often results from assuming that one person can cause another's emotions—that others, for example, are responsible for your feeling disappointed, confused, or irritated; or that you are responsible for others feeling hurt, angry, or upset. Actually, this assumption is incorrect. We may *act* in provocative ways, but everyone is responsible for the way they *react*.

In the same way, it's not accurate to say that people *make* you angry, upset, or even happy. Behavior that upsets or pleases one person might not bring out any reaction from another. If you doubt this fact, think about people you know who respond differently to the same behaviors that you find so bothersome. (You may scream "Jerk!" when you're driving and someone switches lanes in front of you without signaling, whereas the person with you in the car may not even notice or may notice but not care.) The contrast between others' reactions and yours shows that responses are determined more by your own temperament and thinking than by others' behavior.

One way to avoid the debilitative feelings that often accompany the fallacy of causation is to use responsible language, as discussed in Chapter 6. Instead of saying, "You make me so angry," reframe it as your reaction to the other person's behavior: "I don't like when you talk about me behind my back." Instead of saying, "I *had to* visit my parents this weekend; they gave me no option," take responsibility for your choices: "I decided to visit my parents this weekend, but I

may choose differently next time." Taking ownership for your actions and reactions can often lead to a sense of empowerment.

When Guy (Ryan Reynolds) in *Free Guy* discovers his "life" is actually a video game in which he is only a minor non-player character, he demonstrates both artificial and emotional intelligence to free himself from the fallacy of helplessness. ***How does changing your self-talk free and empower you?*** View larger image

The Fallacy of Helplessness

The **fallacy of helplessness** suggests that forces beyond your control determine satisfaction in life. People with this outlook continually see themselves as victims:

> "There's no way I can get ahead in this society. The best thing I can do is to accept it."

> "I was born with a shy personality. I'd like to be more outgoing, but there's nothing I can do about that."
>
> "I can't tell my boss that work is too demanding. If I did, I might lose my job."

The error in such statements becomes apparent once you realize that few paths are completely closed. Many difficulties a person claims can't be solved do have solutions; the task is to discover those solutions and to work diligently at applying them. Changing your self-talk can help you see some of those choices and feel more positive about pursuing them:

> "It's an uphill battle in this society, but I will do my best to bring about change."
>
> "I tend to be shy around strangers, but I'm going to introduce myself to someone I don't know at tonight's party."
>
> "It won't be pleasant to confront my boss, but I can do it."

Even if you simply change "I *can't* tell my boss" to "I *won't* tell my boss," you'll at least be aware of the choice you're making and probably feel less helpless (see the discussion of the language of choice in Section 6.3.3).

The Fallacy of Catastrophic Expectations

Some fearful people operate on the assumption that if something bad can happen, it probably will. This is the **fallacy of catastrophic**

expectations—a position similar to Murphy's Law. These statements are typical of such an attitude:

> "If I invite them to the party, they probably won't want to come."
>
> "If I speak up to try to resolve a conflict, things will probably get worse."
>
> "If I apply for the job I want, I probably won't be hired."
>
> "If I tell them how I really feel, they'll probably just laugh at me."

Once you start imagining terrible consequences, a self-fulfilling prophecy can be set in motion. You believe the worst about yourself or others, then behave in ways that bring your fears to pass. People who have a "pessimism bias" often perceive threats in their relationships that are not apparent to outsiders, leading to relational dissatisfaction (Knobloch et al., 2007). If this is a fallacy that plagues you, it's best to shift your internal language from "I fear the worst" to "I'll hope for the best."

Although it's easy to understand the personal benefits of reducing debilitative emotions, it's important to remember the *interpersonal* reasons for doing so. Simply put, relationships function better when the people involved manage their emotions (English et al., 2013; Knobloch & Metts, 2013). This obviously doesn't mean stifling feelings—quite the contrary. Emotion management involves self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and the kind of reappraisal we're about to discuss. Communicators who manage their emotions are

able to express them in productive ways with their partners, and that helps maintain relationships. With that in mind, we look at how to reduce debilitative emotions that are generally counterproductive to personal and interpersonal health. (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter for a self-appraisal of your emotional fallacies.)

9.4.4 Minimizing Debilitative Emotions

Now you're ready to put into practice the rational-emotive process and self-talk. When practiced conscientiously, they can help you cut down on the self-defeating thinking that leads to many debilitative emotions.

Monitor Your Emotional Reactions

The first step is to recognize when you're having debilitative emotions. As we suggested earlier, one way to notice feelings is through physical stimuli: butterflies in the stomach, racing heart, sweating, and so on. Although such reactions might be symptoms of food poisoning, more often they reflect a strong emotion. You also can recognize certain ways of behaving that suggest your feelings: stomping instead of walking normally, being unusually quiet, and speaking in a sarcastic tone of voice are some examples.

It may seem strange to suggest that it's necessary to look for emotions—they ought to be immediately apparent. However, it's

common to suffer from debilitative feelings for some time without noticing them. For example, at the end of a trying day, you've probably caught yourself frowning and realized that you've been wearing that face for some time without knowing it.

Remember the two key characteristics of debilitating emotions—intensity (they are *too* intense) and duration (they last *too* long)—and use those to guide your assessment.

Note the Activating Event

Once you're aware of how you're feeling, the next step is to figure out what activating event triggered your response. Sometimes it is obvious. If your romantic partner keeps calling you by the name of a former lover, you're likely to become upset. Research shows that dating couples can develop "social allergies" to each other, becoming hypersensitive about their partner's annoying behaviors (Cunningham et al., 2005). In these cases, it's easy to identify what triggers a given response. In other cases, however, the activating event isn't so apparent.

Sometimes there isn't a single activating event but rather a series of small incidents that finally build toward a critical mass and trigger a debilitative feeling. This sort of thing happens when someone teases you over and over about the same thing, or when you suffer a series of small disappointments.

The best way to begin tracking down activating events is to notice the circumstances in which you have debilitative feelings. Perhaps they

occur when you're around *specific people*. For example, you may feel tense or angry every time you encounter a person with whom you have struggled in the past. Until those issues are dealt with, feelings about past events can trigger debilitative emotions, even in apparently innocuous situations.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Regulating Your Emotions Interpersonally

Managing your emotions may sound like a solo activity—something you do for and by yourself. But others can help with the process, and that's what scholars call *interpersonal emotion regulation* (IER). Because IER is associated with emotional well-being and closer relationships, a research team led by Daphne Liu wanted to learn more about its role in everyday communication.

In their study, some 90 adults reported when, why, and to whom they reached out for help in managing their emotions over a two-week period. Most said they looked for assistance when dealing with negative experiences and feelings, typically once every two days. They usually sought the counsel of close friends, and what they wanted most was emotional support ("That sounds rough—tell me more"), not advice.

Unfortunately, participants said that those trying to help often used problem solving ("Here's what you should do") or reappraisal ("Here's another way to look at this"). This mismatch between helper strategies and receiver needs recalls a principle from Chapter 8: When responding to others' distress,

lead with empathy. And if you're tempted to be more directive, ask first if that's what the other person wants. Sometimes it will be—but often all that's needed is a listening ear and some emotional support.

Liu, D.Y., Strube, M.J., & Thompson, R.J. (2021). Interpersonal emotion regulation: An experience sampling study. *Affective Science, 2*, 273–288.

In other cases, you might discover that being around certain *types of individuals* triggers debilitative emotions. For instance, you might become nervous around people who seem more intelligent or self-confident than you are. In other cases, certain *settings* can stimulate unpleasant emotions: parties, work, school. Sometimes the *topic of conversation* is the factor that sets you off, whether politics, religion, sex, or some other subject.

Record Your Self-Talk

This is the point at which you analyze the thoughts that are the link between the activating event and your feelings. If you're serious about getting rid of debilitative emotions, it's important to actually write down your self-talk when first learning to use this method. Putting your thoughts on paper will help you see whether they make any sense.

Monitoring your self-talk might be difficult at first. This is a new skill, and any new activity seems awkward. If you persevere, however, you'll find you will be able to identify the thoughts that lead to your debilitative feelings. Once you get in the habit of recognizing

this internal monologue, you'll be able to identify your thoughts quickly and easily.

Dispute Your Irrational Beliefs

Now is the time to engage in the reappraisal process mentioned earlier in this chapter. Use the discussion of irrational fallacies to find out which of your internal statements are based on mistaken thinking. You can do this most effectively by following three steps. First, decide whether each belief you've recorded is rational or irrational. Next, explain why the belief does or doesn't make sense. Finally, if the belief is irrational, consider an alternative way of thinking that is more sensible and that can leave you feeling better when faced with the same activating event in the future.

Change Your Self-Talk

Once you've disputed your irrational beliefs, it's time to change your intrapersonal language accordingly. Replace words in your self-talk such as "can't," "have to," and "should" with words like "will," "want to," and "choose to." For example:

> Instead of saying, "I can't make small talk with strangers," say, "I will ask more questions with strangers."
>
> Instead of saying, "I have to be polite to rude customers," say, "I choose to be polite because it's better than the other options."

Instead of saying, “I should be less defensive,” say, “I want to be less defensive, so I’m going to work on it.”

In an inspiring tweet, Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka vowed to celebrate herself and her achievements more. She encouraged her followers to do the same: “Your life is your own and you shouldn’t value yourself on other people’s standards.” ***How do others’ appraisals affect your self-talk?*** View larger image

Some researchers (Kross et al., 2014) suggest that self-talk is most effective when it’s stated in the second person: addressing yourself as “you” instead of “I.” It’s almost as if you’re coaching yourself. For example,

> "Jennifer, what are you nervous about? It's not the first date you've ever been on. I know you like this guy, but take it slow, and stay calm. Even if it doesn't go perfectly, it won't be the end of the world. You're capable, intelligent, accomplished, beautiful. Just do your best and let the chips fall. Chill, Jen." (Weintraub, 2015)

After reading about this method for dealing with unpleasant emotions, some readers have objections:

"*This approach sounds like nothing more than trying to talk yourself out of feeling bad*." This accusation is totally correct. After all, because you talk yourself into feeling bad, what's wrong with talking yourself out of bad feelings, especially when they are based on irrational thoughts?

"*The kind of disputing we just read sounds phony and unnatural. I don't talk to myself in sentences and paragraphs*." There's no need to dispute your irrational beliefs in any special literary style. You can be just as colloquial as you want. The important thing is to clearly understand what thoughts led you into your debilitative feeling so you can clearly reappraise them. When the technique is new to you, it's a good idea to write or talk out your thoughts to make them clear. After you've had some practice, you'll be able to do these steps in a quicker, less formal way.

"*This approach is too cold and impersonal. It seems to aim at turning people into calculating, emotionless machines*." This is simply not true. A rational thinker can still dream, hope, and love—there's nothing necessarily irrational about feelings like these. Put another way, communicators can use both their heads and their hearts when making decisions (Fetterman & Robinson, 2013). We discuss accentuating positive emotions in the following section.

"*This technique promises too much. There's no chance I could rid myself of all unpleasant feelings, however nice that might be.*" We can answer this by assuring you that reappraisal won't make all your debilitative feelings go away. What it can do is reduce their number, intensity, and duration.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Toxic Positivity: Too Much of a Good Thing

"Don't worry, be happy" may be a catchy lyric, but it's not always welcome or even sound advice. The same is true of phrases like "Cheer up" or "Good vibes only." It often helps to have a positive mindset when managing emotions (see Section 9.4.5). Yet denying or minimizing negative thoughts and feelings can be poisonous for ourselves and our relationships.

Toxic positivity assumes that the best or only way to cope with a bad situation is to put an optimistic spin on it (Bernstein, 2021). Psychologist Natalie Dattilo believes this comes from "our tendency to undervalue negative emotional experiences and overvalue positive ones"—especially in U.S. culture (Chiu, 2020). It may be tempting to ignore or suppress emotions like fear, anger, and grief. However, research shows that accepting negative feelings, rather than avoiding or dismissing them, is beneficial for a person's mental health (Ford et al., 2018). Happiness researcher Laurie Santos agrees, noting that "negative emotions are really good" and that we ignore them at our peril (Ducharme, 2023).

Interpersonally, platitudes such as "It will all be fine" can be particularly unhelpful when responding to others' problems. As Section 8.4.4 describes, empathizing allows you to acknowledge others' feelings without invalidating them. Consider how a response of "I get it—I would worry and be unhappy too" or simply "I'm here for you" is feedback that doesn't police emotions, prescribe action, or limit subsequent conversations.

Ultimately, positivity and negative emotions aren't mutually exclusive. Dattilo puts it this way: "We can feel sad and be grieving and still look forward to the future. Both of those are necessary for a healthy outlook and sense of well-being."

9.4.5 Maximizing Facilitative Emotions

Reducing debilitative emotions is only part of the emotional health equation. Contemporary scholars maintain that fostering positive emotions is just as important as minimizing negative ones (Gibbon, 2020). If thoughts cause feelings, then positive thoughts can cause positive feelings. Ruminating on the good rather than the bad in life can enhance one's emotional, relational, and even physical health (Rius-Ottenheim et al., 2013).

It's unrealistic to think that you'll have a positive emotional response to every event. And as the Dark Side box in this section notes, it's possible to go overboard with positivity. The key, according to

Harvard professor Susan David, is to cultivate what she calls "emotional agility."

> Emotional agility is a skill set that builds on our ability to face our emotions, label them, understand them and then choose to move forward deliberately. It is the ability to recognize when you're feeling stressed, be able to step out of your stress, and then decide how to act in a way that is congruent with your personal values and aligned with your goals. (Semnani, 2016)

Even though you can't dictate all the events of your life, you have the power to reappraise them. You can regard challenging situations as growth opportunities. Optimistically viewing yourself as competent and your goals as attainable promotes success (Bortolotti, 2018). The difference between "I am a failure" and "I am strong and capable" is often a matter of mindset—and positive emotions follow positive appraisals.

Many people find it easier to focus on their negative emotional experiences. It often takes mindful effort to pay attention to and express pleasurable feelings in close relationships. Here are 10 emotions that research (Fredrickson, 2009) identifies as basic to positivity: *joy*, *gratitude*, *serenity*, *interest*, *hope*, *pride*, *amusement*, *inspiration*, *awe*, and *love*. How many have you experienced recently? How often do you express these emotions to people who matter? Is it possible that you felt but can't recall them? Identifying and then talking or writing about your positive emotional experiences can lead to greater personal and interpersonal satisfaction. (See Activity 4 at the end of the chapter for a reflection on maximizing positive emotions.)

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 9.1 **Explain how emotions are experienced and expressed.**

Emotionally intelligent people are generally more effective communicators. Emotions have several dimensions. They are signaled by internal physiological changes, manifested by verbal and nonverbal reactions, and defined in most cases by cognitive interpretations.

Q: Over the course of this week, keep a journal recording your emotional responses to interactions in an important relationship. In particular, pay attention to how those responses begin internally and then are expressed externally.

Objective 9.2 **Describe the various personal and social influences on emotional expression.**

There are several reasons why people do not verbalize many of the emotions they feel. Certain personality types respond to emotions more negatively than others. Some cultures encourage while others discourage the expression of emotions. Sex and gender also shape the way people experience and express emotions. Many social roles and rules discourage the expression

of some feelings, particularly negative ones. Some people express emotions so rarely that they lose the ability to recognize when they are feeling them. Social media may also increase the intensity of emotions for both message senders and receivers. Finally, exposure to others' emotions can shape the way we ourselves feel through the process of emotional contagion.

Q: Nature versus nurture: Analyze the various factors that influence whether and how you express your emotions. To what extent do you think your responses are primarily based on your personality (i.e., nature)? What social and environmental factors (i.e., nurture) shape the way you do or don't express emotions? Give examples to illustrate your analysis.

Objective 9.3 **Demonstrate how to express your emotions appropriately and effectively.**

Because total expression of feelings is not appropriate for adults, several guidelines help define when and how to share emotions effectively. Self-awareness, clear language, and expression of multiple feelings are important, as is the ability to recognize the difference between feeling and acting. Willingness to accept responsibility for feelings instead of blaming them on others leads to better reactions. Choosing the proper time and place to share feelings is also important.

Q: Assess how effectively you express your emotions. Are you able to identify your feelings and put them into

words? How appropriately do you share them with others? How could you apply the guidelines in this chapter to express your emotions more effectively and appropriately?

Objective 9.4 **Distinguish between facilitative and debilitative emotions, and explain how reappraisal may be used to manage emotions effectively.**

Whereas some emotions are facilitative, meaning they contribute to effective functioning, other, debilitative feelings inhibit effective performance. Many of these debilitative emotions are caused by various types of irrational thinking. It is often possible to communicate more confidently and effectively by identifying troublesome emotions, identifying the activating event and self-talk that triggered them, and reappraising any irrational thoughts with a more logical analysis of the situation. It's also important to identify and enjoy facilitative emotions.

Q: Consider the last time you experienced a debilitative emotion associated with an interpersonal relationship. How well were you able to manage it? How might the methods in this chapter help you process emotions such as this one in the future?

ACTIVITIES

1. **Ethical Challenge:** Section 9.3.6 notes that there's scientific support for the adage "Never go to bed angry." Do you think it's ever appropriate to go to sleep while upset with your relational partner? If so, under what circumstances? Is it fair to say to your partner, "I'm angry with you, but I don't want to discuss it until tomorrow"? Why or why not?
2. **Build Your Skill:** Section 9.3 describes the skills of identifying and expressing your feelings. Consider two recent interpersonal encounters in which you had some strong emotional responses. Identify three specific emotions you experienced (examples: "At my birthday party I was surprised, delighted, and embarrassed"; "In a family discussion I was frustrated, hurt, and relieved").

   Now write out to whom and how you might express some of those emotions. For instance, "I told my coworker that I loved the surprise party; I admitted to my partner that I was a bit embarrassed." Or "I might tell my dad I was hurt that he didn't trust me; I'll probably tell my sister I was relieved that she supported me."

What did you learn about emotion identification and expression from this exercise?

3. **Self-Appraisal:** Review Section 9.4.3 and determine which fallacy you most commonly experience, offering an example (e.g., "I use the words *never* and *always* a lot, a symptom of overgeneralization"):
    a. Fallacy of perfection
    b. Fallacy of approval
    c. Fallacy of should
    d. Fallacy of overgeneralization
    e. Fallacy of causation
    f. Fallacy of helplessness
    g. Fallacy of catastrophic expectations

    Describe how you can rephrase your fallacious thinking to be more accurate (e.g., replacing *always* with *sometimes*). Does changing your descriptions help you manage your emotions?
4. **Reflection:** For one week, keep a daily journal in which you identify all the positive emotions you experience in your relationships. In particular, watch for these 10 emotions noted in Section 9.4.5: *joy*, *gratitude*, *serenity*, *interest*, *hope*, *pride*, *amusement*, *inspiration*, *awe*, and *love*. At the end of the week, reflect on whether your journaling helped you notice and remember positive emotions you might otherwise have missed or forgotten.

What strategies can you develop to help you experience and express positive emotions more often?

Assessing Your Communication: Your Emotional Intelligence (Personal Practice)

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LIST OF KEY TERMS

debilitative emotions

emotional contagion

emotional intelligence

emotional labor

facilitative emotions

fallacy of approval

fallacy of catastrophic expectations

fallacy of causation

fallacy of helplessness

fallacy of overgeneralization

fallacy of perfection

fallacy of should

reappraisal

rumination

self-talk

CHAPTER 9 Flashcards

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10
Dynamics of Interpersonal Relationships

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

10.1 **Recognize the various reasons for entering into interpersonal relationships.**

10.2 **Describe the stages and dialectical tensions typically experienced in interpersonal relationships.**

10.3 Identify specific skills communicators can use to maintain and improve their interpersonal relationships.

A TEAM OF WELLNESS REPORTERS at *The New York Times* examined 80 years of research done at Harvard University (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023) and offered this New Year's resolution: *Develop stronger relationships*. "If you're going to make one single decision that would ensure your own health and happiness," says reporter Jancee Dunn, "the science tells us that it should be to cultivate warm relationships of all kinds" (Jackson, 2023). The team offered relationship-building suggestions ranging from telling people why you're grateful for them to striking up conversations with strangers. From weak ties to strong ones, interpersonal relationships are central to improving the quality of life.

This chapter explores some of the general dynamics that characterize interpersonal relationships and the communication that occurs within them. You'll see that relationships aren't fixed or static. Rather, they can, and often do, change over time. In other words, a relationship is less a *thing* than a *process.* This chapter looks at why we form relationships, the dynamics of those relationships, and how to manage them. Chapter 11 extends this discussion by focusing on specific

> relational contexts: close relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners.

10.1 Why We Form Relationships

Why form relationships with some people and not with others? Sometimes there's no choice: Children can't select their parents, and most employees aren't able to choose their coworkers. In many other cases, however, communicators seek out some people and actively avoid others.

Social scientists have collected an impressive body of research on interpersonal attraction (e.g., Swami, 2021; Veksler & Eden, 2017). The following are some of the factors they have identified that influence the choice of relational partners.

10.1.1 Appearance

Despite the proverbial advice not to judge a book by its cover, "it's undeniable that appearance matters," says interpersonal attraction scholar Viren Swami (2021). That's certainly the case with "swipe right" apps, where dating choices are based almost entirely on physical features (Nicholson, 2019). But appearance is an important factor in face-to-face attraction too—and not just for romantic partners. There's a tendency to seek out attractive people for friends

(Degges-White, 2018). And there's an underlying benefit to doing so: online profile owners are rated as more attractive when they have pictures of physically attractive friends on their sites (Jaschinski & Kommers, 2012). This isn't to suggest that you should surround yourself with beautiful people for self-serving reasons. It's simply acknowledging that appearance plays a role in interpersonal attraction—for better or for worse (see the Dark Side box on "Lookism" in Chapter 7).

Even if your appearance isn't beautiful by societal standards, consider these facts. First, after initial impressions have passed, perceived beauty is influenced by traits such as liking, respect, familiarity, and social interaction (Singh et al., 2009). Physical factors become less important as a relationship progresses (Hall & Compton, 2017). In fact, as romantic relationships develop, partners create "positive illusions," viewing one another as more physically attractive over time (Martinez-Conde, 2015). And ultimately, partners are drawn to each other more by similarity than by appearance, as you'll see now.

10.1.2 Similarity

According to what's known as the *similarity thesis*, perhaps the strongest determinant of relationship formation is similarity to another person (Montoya & Horton, 2013). For example, an analysis of a leading dating app revealed that the more points of similarity two app users have, the greater the likelihood they will find each other attractive and opt to meet in person (Levy et al., 2019). This

was true across nearly every characteristic: psychological traits, physical traits, education, religion—even preferred mobile devices. The only exception was introversion: introverts rarely had an effective match with other introverts.

Similarity is the basis for more than just romantic attraction—it's also the foundation of most friendships. Not surprisingly, you tend to be drawn to those who share your interests, attitudes, and values (Bahns et al., 2017). Think about your inner circle of friends and you can probably identify a host of things you have in common. And as you'll read later in this chapter, if your similar interests change or your values shift, it will likely bring change to your relationship (Langheit & Poulin, 2022).

There are several reasons that similarity is a strong foundation for relationships (Seldman, 2018). First, similarity can be validating. The fact that another person shares your beliefs, tastes, and values is a form of ego support. Second, similarity makes others more likely to enjoy the same activities you do, such as going to particular restaurants or concerts. Put simply, similar people have more fun together than do partners with many differences. A third explanation for the similarity thesis is that when you learn that other people are similar to you, you may assume they'll probably like you, so you in turn like them (Hampton, 2019). The self-fulfilling prophecy creeps into the picture again.

10.1.3 Complementarity

Scholars endorsing the similarity thesis maintain that "birds of a feather flock together" is a far better explanation for relational initiation than "opposites attract." In fact, they argue that opposites attracting is the stuff of fairy tales and rom-coms more than real-life romances (Swami, 2017). Nevertheless, relational partners are rarely similar in all characteristics—and wouldn't want to be.

Differences strengthen a relationship when they are *complementary*—when each partner's characteristics satisfy the other's needs (Whitbourne, 2014). For instance, relationships can work well when the partners agree that one will exercise control in certain areas

("You handle all the tech decisions") and the other will take the lead in different ones ("I'll decide how we ought to decorate the place"). This kind of complementary control-sharing has been shown to strengthen parent–child relationships (Shewark et al., 2022).

For more than 50 years, TV and film episodes of *Star Trek* have followed the adventures of the emotional James Kirk and his hyperrational first mate, Spock. Their complementary personalities contribute to a rich, satisfying relationship. ***In what ways are any of your close relationships enriched by complementarity?*** View larger image

Successful work partnerships often involve people with complementary skill sets (Sias et al., 2020). Think of your job colleagues and you can likely identify differences in abilities and approaches that aided the group effort. That's one reason some companies use personality profiles in team-building activities—to help coworkers understand and appreciate their differences (Mendoza, 2021). The same can hold true in your personal

relationships. Embracing complementarity ("you're good at this, I'm good at that—glad we have each other") can make relationships stronger (Joel, 2014).

10.1.4 Rewards

Some relationships are based on an economic model called **social exchange theory** (Stafford, 2008; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This approach suggests that communicators seek out people who can provide rewards that are greater than or equal to the costs they encounter in dealing with the relationship. Social exchange theorists define rewards as any desired outcome. They may be tangible (a nice place to live, a high-paying job) or intangible (prestige, emotional support, companionship). Costs are undesirable outcomes: unpleasant work, emotional pain, and so on.

A simple formula captures the calculus of social exchange: *Rewards – Costs = Outcome*. According to social exchange theorists, people use this formula (often unconsciously) to calculate whether a relationship is "a good deal" or "not worth the effort," based on whether the outcome is positive or negative (Frisby et al., 2015). Communicators make these kinds of evaluations in romantic relationships and also in friendships, job decisions, neighborhood choices, etc.

Costs and rewards don't exist in isolation; they're defined by comparing a certain situation with alternatives. For example, consider a hypothetical woman, Gloria, who is struggling to decide

whether to remain in a relationship with her longtime romantic partner. Dru has a quick temper and has become verbally abusive from time to time. Also, Gloria knows that Dru was unfaithful at least once. In deciding whether to stay with Dru, Gloria will use two standards.

The first standard is her **comparison level (CL)**—her minimum standard of what behavior is acceptable in a relationship. If Gloria believes that relational partners have an obligation to be faithful and treat one another respectfully at all times, then Dru's behavior will fall below her comparison level. This will be especially true if Gloria has had positive romantic relationships in the past (Merolla et al., 2004). On the other hand, if Gloria adopts a "nobody's perfect" standard, she is more likely to view Dru's behavior as meeting or exceeding her comparison level.

Gloria also will rate Dru according to her **comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt})**. This standard refers to a comparison between the rewards she receives in her present situation and those she could expect to receive in others (Overall & Sibley, 2008). If, for example, Gloria doesn't want to be alone and she thinks, "If I don't have Dru I won't have anyone," then her CL_{alt} would be lower than her present situation. But if she is confident that she could find a kinder partner, her CL_{alt} would be higher than the status quo. Research suggests that if one or both partners are constantly monitoring their alternatives, the relationship is likely on shaky ground and headed toward breakup (Ritchie et al., 2021).

At first this information seems to offer little comfort to those who are in unsatisfying relationships. But there are choices other than being stuck in situations where the costs outweigh the rewards. First, you might make sure that you are judging your present relationship against a realistic CL. Expecting a situation to be perfect can be a recipe for unhappiness and relational dissatisfaction (Mikkelson et al., 2016). If you decide that your present situation truly falls below your CL, you might explore whether there are other alternatives you haven't considered (Sharabi & Timmermans, 2021). And finally, the skills introduced throughout this book may help you negotiate a better relationship with the other person (assuming the relationship isn't abusive—see the Dark Side feature in this section).

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

The Anguish of Abusive Relationships

It would be nice if all relationships were happy, healthy, and mutually reinforcing. The unfortunate truth, however, is that some relationships become abusive. Abuse can be mental, emotional, verbal, sexual, or physical, and it can leave scars that remain long after the relationship is over.

Many abusive relationships don't end when they should. Why do people stay in them? Social exchange theory offers an explanation (Kreager et al., 2013). Abused partners often believe that a bad relationship is better than no relationship at all. They may also have trouble seeing viable relational alternatives (Copp et al., 2015). Perspective gets lost and rationalizations get made—and the pain goes on. Research has

shown that people in abusive dating relationships underestimate how unhappy they really are and overestimate how unhappy they would be if the relationship were to end (Arriaga et al., 2013).

Professional help is vital for pulling free from an abusive relationship (*www.healthyplace.com/abuse* offers information and resources). Experts recommend the following:

- *Don't keep abuse a secret*. At the very least, tell a trusted friend or family member what's happening to you—and then ask that person to help you get help.
- *Watch for patterns.* Abuse often happens in cycles. If you're in the upside of a cycle and all is calm, it can be easy to ignore or overlook a previous violation. But if the abuse returns, it probably won't be the last time.
- *Resist self-blame.* Abused people often believe they are at fault for what happened to them, and that somehow they "had it coming." Remember—*no one deserves abuse*.

10.1.5 Competency

People who are competent and capable tend to be perceived positively, especially when they communicate in a warm, engaging way (Fiske, 2018). But warmth without competence isn't so

endearing: One study revealed that people who make errors in their dating profiles (typos, misspellings, grammatical mistakes) are viewed as less attentive, intelligent, and attractive than people with error-free profiles (Van der Zanden et al., 2020). The takeaway: when others form impressions of you based on limited online data, it's important to present yourself as a competent communicator.

While competency is appealing, people who seem *too* perfect can be off-putting. One classic study demonstrated how competence and imperfection combine to affect attraction (Aronson, 2008). Researchers asked subjects to evaluate recordings of two candidates for a quiz program. One candidate seemed practically perfect: He answered almost all the questions correctly and modestly admitted that he was an honor student, accomplished athlete, and college yearbook editor. The other candidate, who answered fewer questions correctly, had a comparatively average profile. Toward the end of half the recordings, the candidates committed a blunder, spilling coffee all over themselves. The remaining half of the recordings contained no such blunder. These, then, were the four experimental conditions: (1) a person with superior ability who blundered, (2) a person with superior ability who did not blunder, (3) an average person who blundered, and (4) an average person who did not blunder.

The ratings of the candidates in these four conditions revealed an interesting and important principle of interpersonal attraction. The person rated as most attractive was the superior candidate who blundered. The researchers concluded that communicators have a preference for competent people who do not seem too perfect.

10.1.6 Proximity

As common sense suggests, you are likely to develop relationships with people with whom you interact frequently (Swami, 2021). In many cases, proximity leads to liking. For instance, you're more likely to develop friendships with close neighbors—whether near where you live or in adjacent seats in class (Back et al., 2008)—than with distant ones. Chances are also good that you'll choose a mate with whom you cross paths often. One scholar noted how co-stars in movies and shows often fall in love with each other (Elder, 2018). Her theory is that when actors spend hours together every day for weeks—often in romantic roles—it increases the likelihood that a relational spark will occur.

As you learned in Chapter 2, mediated communication channels mean that geographical proximity is no longer the constraint it once was. Contemporary communicators can create virtual proximity (Amaya, 2020). If you interact with someone regularly online, be it on social media or Zoom calls or email, it may increase your attraction to that person—not necessarily romantically, but relationally. Facts like these are understandable when you consider that proximity allows us to get more information about other people and benefit from a relationship with them. Also, people in close proximity may be more similar to you. For example, if you live in the same neighborhood, odds are you'll have the same socioeconomic status—or if you visit the same blog site each day, chances are you have similar interests.

Alone in a new country, Emily (Lily Collins, left) strikes up relationships with people in and near her apartment building in the TV series *Emily in Paris*. ***Which of your relationships were forged out of proximity?*** View larger image

10.1.7 Disclosure

Chapter 4 describes how telling others important information about yourself can help build liking, both in person (Schafer, 2015) and through social media (Dai et al., 2016). Sometimes the basis of this attraction comes from learning about ways you're similar, either in experiences ("I broke off an engagement myself") or in attitudes ("I feel nervous with strangers, too"). Self-disclosure also increases liking because it indicates regard. Sharing private information is a form of respect and trust—a kind of liking that we've already seen increases attractiveness.

Not all disclosure leads to liking. Research shows that the key to satisfying self-disclosure is reciprocity: getting back an amount and kind of information equivalent to what you reveal (Sprecher & Treger, 2015). A second important ingredient in successful self-disclosure is context. It's probably unwise to talk about your sexual insecurities with a new acquaintance or express your pet peeves to a friend at your birthday party. This is particularly true on social media: Disclosures made privately are perceived as more appropriate and intimate than those made publicly; also, disclosures made publicly reduce liking for the discloser (Lin & Utz, 2017). And keep in mind the warnings from Chapter 2 about hyperpersonal communication, cyberstalking, and permanence in online interaction. Self-disclose to others with care and caution, particularly through mediated channels. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for a reflection on why you form your interpersonal relationships.)

10.2 Models of Relational Dynamics

Even the most stable relationships vary from day to day and over longer periods of time. Communication scholars have attempted to describe and explain how communication creates and reflects the changing dynamics of relationships. This section discusses two different characterizations of relational development and interaction.

10.2.1 Stages of Relational Development

One of the best-known models of relational stages was developed by communication scholar Mark Knapp (Knapp et al., 2020; see also Fox et al., 2013; Honeycutt, 2019). He broke the waxing and waning of relationships into 10 steps that involve coming together and coming apart. Other researchers have suggested that any model of relational communication ought to contain a third area—**relational maintenance**—aimed at keeping relationships operating smoothly and satisfactorily (we'll discuss relational maintenance in more detail later in this chapter). Figure 10.1 shows how Knapp's 10 stages fit into this three-part view of relational communication. We now explore each stage in detail.

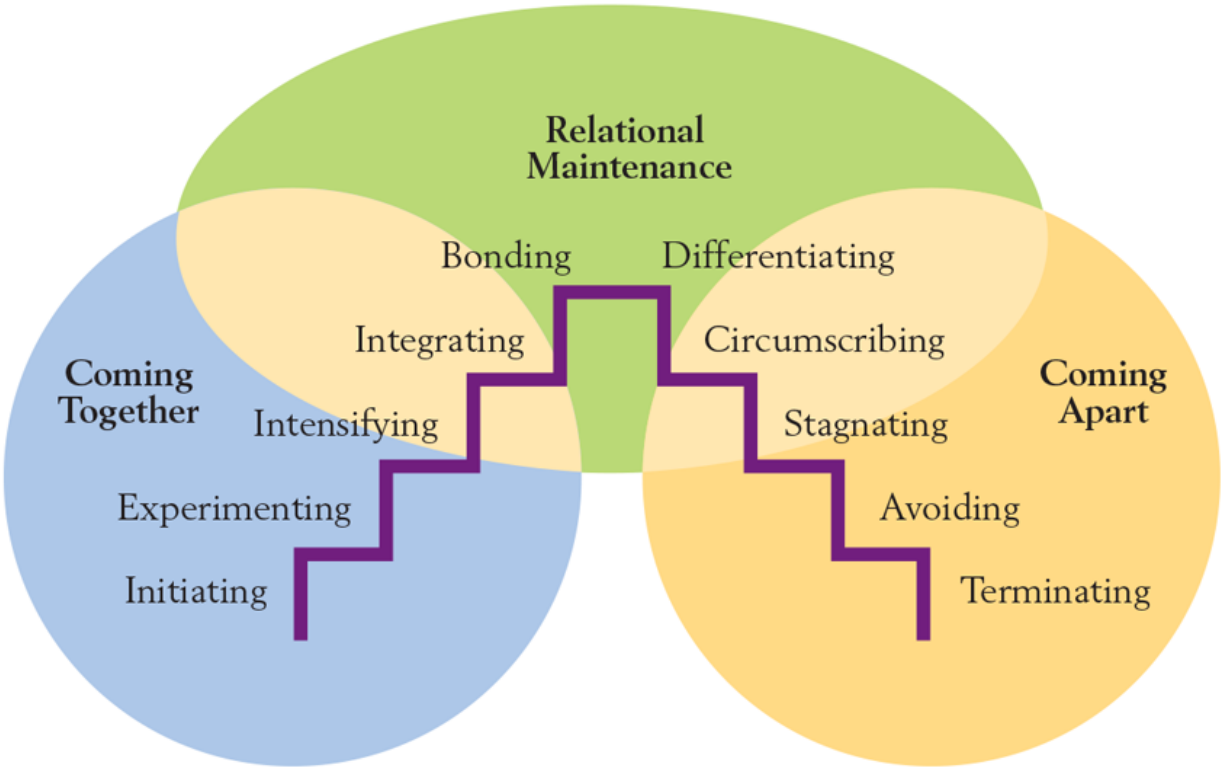


FIGURE 10.1 Stages of Relationship Development Adapted from Knapp, M. L., Vangelisti, A. L., & Caughlin, J. P. (2020). Interpersonal communication and human relationships (8th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt. View larger image

Initiating

The goals in the **initiating** stage are to show that you are interested in making contact and to demonstrate that you are a person worth talking to (Solomon & Roloff, 2018). Communication during this stage is usually brief, and it generally follows conventional formulas: handshakes, remarks about innocuous subjects such as the weather, and friendly expressions. Such behavior may seem superficial and meaningless, but it is a way of signaling that you're interested in building some kind of relationship with the other person. It allows us

to say, without saying, “I’m a friendly person, and I’d like to get to know you.”

Initiating relationships—especially romantic ones—can be particularly difficult for people who are shy. Social media can make it easier for reticent people to strike up a relationship (Hammick & Lee, 2014). Not only is online initiating easier for some, but it can result in successful relationships. One survey found that 30 percent of American adults have used a dating site or app (Anderson et al., 2020), while a similar percentage in another survey say they know someone who has met a spouse or long-term partner via online dating (Smith, 2016).

Keep in mind that initiating is the opening stage of *all* relationships, not just romantic ones. Friendships start here (Hall, 2019), and so do business partnerships. In fact, some have compared employment interviews to first dates because they have similar properties (Kamien, 2021). As you read about the stages that follow, consider how the communication involved could be true of landing a job, connecting with a roommate, or joining an organization—as well as forming a romantic relationship.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

The Value of Online Profiles for First Dates

First dates can be a nerve-racking proposition. Communication researcher Liesel Sharabi ran experiments to see if access to

online profiles could facilitate interaction in daters' initial meetups.

Sharabi's team recruited 108 previously unacquainted cross-sex dyads for the study. Half were given full online profiles about the people they would meet. The others were offered only basic information about their dating partners. Participants were then escorted into a living room lab and given seven minutes to get acquainted with their dates.

Participant surveys revealed that those who viewed their partners' profiles were more eager to communicate going into the date. They were also more willing to engage in self-disclosure and warm nonverbal cues (such as smiling) during the interaction. Profile viewers had higher satisfaction with the date and were likelier to want to meet with their partners again.

The researchers concluded that access to online profiles reduces uncertainty and thus facilitates communication. Advance information helps grease initial interactions ("I saw on your profile that you like video gaming—so do I"). When it comes to the Initiating and Experimenting stages of a relationship, it pays to do your homework on the person you're meeting.

Sharabi, L. L. (2021). Online dating profiles, first-date interactions, and the enhancement of communication satisfaction and desires for future interaction. *Communication Monographs, 88,* 131–153.

Experimenting

The first phase after making contact with an interesting new person is termed **experimenting**. It usually begins with the basics: "Where are you from? What's your major?" From there we look for other similarities: "You're a runner, too? How many miles do you run a week?"

The hallmark of experimenting is small talk (Shaughnessy et al., 2015). People tolerate the ordeal of small talk because it serves several functions. First, it is a useful way to find out what interests you share with the other person. It also provides a way to "audition" the other person—to help us decide whether a relationship is worth pursuing. In addition, small talk is a safe way to ease into a relationship. You haven't risked much as you decide whether to proceed further.

Scholars have noted, and your experience probably confirms, the importance of social media during the experimenting stage (see the Focus on Research sidebar). College students in one study said that this stage in romantic relationships often involves a social media request or invite (Fox et al., 2013). Once access is given, communicators can look over each other's site, learning important information about the other person at a glance (Goldberg et al., 2022). Photos and mutual friends are important factors in deciding whether to continue developing a relationship. And of course, gathering this information online is less face-threatening and involves no stammering, blushing, or awkward pauses.

Of course, not all relational experiments are successful. You can probably think of times when you knew within an hour of meeting up with a potential new friend that things were going nowhere. The same can happen when online daters take the plunge and meet in person. The relationship that seemed promising in virtual reality may become less so when interacting face to face. Communication researchers call this shift in communication channels *modality switching* and have found that it comes with a variety of challenges (Ramirez et al., 2015). In general, the longer online couples hold off meeting in person, the more awkward it will be when they attempt to transition to face-to-face communication. More specifically, meetups are disappointing when a partner is not as attractive and communicatively competent as expected (Zhao & Yan, 2022). This speaks to the need to include audio/video channels in online dating so there are fewer surprises when meeting in person (see Section 2.3.1).

Intensifying

When a relationship begins **intensifying**, communicators increase their amount of contact and the breadth and depth of their self-

disclosure. In friendships, intensifying often includes spending more time together, participating in shared activities, hanging out with mutual friends, or taking trips together (Johnson et al., 2004). Dating couples use a wide range of strategies to communicate that their relationship is intensifying (Levine et al., 2006). One of them is saying "I love you," a step that has become fraught with meaning in U.S. culture (Bonos, 2019). More often they use less direct methods of communication, perhaps as a way to protect their face: doing favors for the partner, giving tokens of affection, hinting and flirting, expressing feelings nonverbally, getting to know the partner's friends and family, and trying to look more attractive.

The intensifying stage is usually a time of relational excitement and even euphoria. In friendships, it's about enthusiasm for having a new "BFF." For romantic partners, it's often filled with starstruck gazes, goosebumps, and "catching feelings" (LeFebvre & Carmack, 2022). As a result, it's a stage that's regularly depicted in movies and romance novels—after all, most viewers love to watch lovers in love (Johnson & Holmes, 2009). The problem, of course, is that the stage doesn't last forever. Sometimes romantic partners who stop feeling goosebumps begin to question whether they're still in love, and friends begin to discover one another's flaws. Although it's possible that the relationship isn't as good as it seems, it's equally likely that it has simply moved on to a different stage—such as integrating.

Integrating

As the relationship strengthens, the individuals enter an **integrating** stage; they begin to take on an identity as a social unit. Invitations begin to come addressed to a couple. Social circles merge. The partners share each other's commitments: "Sure, we'll spend Thanksgiving with your family." They may begin to designate common property—our apartment, our car, our song (Harris et al., 2020). They develop routines and rituals that reinforce their identity as a couple—jogging together, eating at a favorite restaurant, expressing physical affection, and worshipping together (Garcia-Rada et al., 2019). This is also when partners may take time to "define the relationship," putting into words and labels their relational status (Knopp et al., 2020). As these examples illustrate, the stage of integrating is a time when you give up some characteristics of your former self and become enmeshed with another person (Martinez et al., 2016).

Integrating may include "officializing" on social media that a couple is in a relationship (Benjamin, 2021; Lane et al., 2016). Of course, the meaning of this gesture can be different for each partner. One study found that in heterosexual relationships, women tend to perceive online declarations as involving more intensity and commitment than men do (Fox & Warber, 2013). As a result, women may connect online officializing with the rights and restrictions normally associated with bonding—a stage we look at now.

Bonding

During the **bonding** stage, partners make symbolic public gestures to show the world that their relationship exists and that a commitment has been made (Foster, 2008). These can include engagement or marriage, sharing a residence, a public ceremony, or a written or verbal pledge. The key is that bonding is the culmination of a developed relationship—the "officializing" of a couple's integration. Communication plays an important role in this process. For instance, the phrase "I do" in a marriage ceremony is what linguists call a "performative utterance"—words that don't simply mean or imply but actually *enact* a change (Gabbert, 2018).

Relationships don't have to be romantic to achieve bonding. Consider, for instance, authors contracting to write a book together or a student being initiated into a sorority. As Lillian Rubin (1985)

notes, in some cultures there are rituals for friends to mark their bonded status through a public commitment:

> Some Western cultures have rituals to mark the progress of a friendship and to give it public legitimacy and form. In Germany, for example, there's a small ceremony called *Duzen*, the name itself signifying the transformation in the relationship. The ritual calls for the two friends, each holding a glass of wine or beer, to entwine arms, thus bringing each other physically close, and to drink up after making a promise of eternal brotherhood with the word *Bruderschaft*. When it's over, the friends will have passed from a relationship that requires the formal *Sie* mode of address to the familiar *du*.

Bonding usually marks an important turning point in relationships. Up to now the relationship may have developed at a steady pace: Experimenting gradually moved into intensifying and then into integrating. Now, however, there is a surge of commitment. The public display and declaration of exclusivity make this a critical period in the relationship (Macleod, 2017).

Differentiating

So far, we have been looking at the growth of relationships. Although some reach a plateau of development, going on successfully for as long as a lifetime, others pass through several stages of decline and dissolution. Even in the most committed relationships, partners often find themselves needing to reestablish their individual identities in a stage that Knapp calls **differentiating**.

This transition often shows up in a couple's pronoun usage. Instead of talking about "our" weekend plans, differentiating conversations focus on what "I" want to do. Relational issues that were once agreed on (such as "You'll be the breadwinner and I'll manage the home")

now become points of contention: “Why am *I* stuck at home when I have better career potential than *you*?” The root of the term *differentiating* is the word *different*, suggesting that embracing change plays an important role in managing this stage (Cloutier & Peetz, 2017).

Differentiation also can be positive, considering that people need to be individuals as well as part of a relationship (Romanelli, 2020). Think, for instance, of young adults who want to forge their own unique lives and identities, even while maintaining their relationships with their families of origin (Skowron et al., 2009). As Figure 10.1 shows, differentiating is often a part of normal relational maintenance in which partners manage the inevitable challenges that come their way. The key to successful differentiation is maintaining commitment to a relationship while also creating the space for being individuals (this is described later in the chapter as the *connection–autonomy dialectic*).

Circumscribing

In the **circumscribing** stage, partners reduce the scope of their contact with each other. The word “circumscribe” comes from the Latin meaning “to draw circles around.” Distinctions that emerged in the differentiating stage become more clearly marked and labeled: “my friends” and “your friends”; “my bank account” and “your bank account”; “my room” and “your room.”

Such distinctions can be markers of a healthy balance between individual and relational identity. They become a problem, however,

when there are clearly more areas of separation than integration in a relationship, or when the areas of separation seriously limit interaction, such as taking a personal vacation expressly to put space between you and your partner.

Stagnating

If circumscribing continues, the relationship begins to stagnate. Members behave toward each other in old, familiar ways without much feeling. No growth occurs; relational boredom sets in (Harasymchuk et al. 2021). The **stagnating** relationship is a shell of

its former self. You've probably known couples who unenthusiastically have the same conversations, see the same people, and follow the same routines without any sense of joy or novelty. Or maybe you get together with an old friend and because your lives have gone in such different directions, the energy of your former relationship is gone (Dunbar, 2021). You end up reminiscing about "the good ol' days" because you don't have much in common anymore. And perhaps you decide not to meet up again.

Avoiding

When stagnation becomes too unpleasant, people in a relationship begin to create distance between each other by **avoiding**. Sometimes they do it under the guise of excuses ("I've been sick lately and can't see you") and sometimes directly ("Please don't call me; I don't want to see you now"). In either case, by this point the handwriting is on the wall about the relationship's future.

Some relationships stall out at this stage. Friends, lovers, or family members simply drift apart, rarely if ever to interact again. While sometimes that's a natural parting of ways, other times it leaves important things unsaid. A need for some degree of relationship closure (Dailey et al., 2013) often leads to a final stage: terminating.

Terminating

Not all relationships end. Partnerships, friendships, and marriages can last for a lifetime once they're established. But many do

deteriorate and reach the final stage, **terminating**, which has its own distinguishable pattern. Characteristics of this stage include summary dialogues of where the relationship has gone and the desire to dissociate. The relationship may end with a cordial dinner, a note left on the kitchen table, a phone call, a text, or a legal document stating the dissolution. Depending on each person's feelings, this terminating stage can be quite short and amicable, or it may be bitterly drawn out over time.

Scholars have begun to investigate the role technology can play in relational termination. About 30 percent of teens have broken up or been broken up with by text message, even though they know it's bad form (Lenhart et al., 2015). Obviously, breaking up this way runs the risk of wounding and infuriating the person being dumped ("She didn't even have the guts to tell me to my face") and lessens the likelihood of post-relationship goodwill. A different study found that those on the receiving end of a breakup via a mediated channel tended to have high levels of attachment anxiety—which might explain why their partners didn't want to deliver the news in person (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013). And it can be even more painful when a relationship is terminated via ghosting (see the Dark Side box in Chapter 12).

Once a relationship is over, it may be wise to take a break from social media connections with that person (LeFebvre et al., 2015). Checking up on a former partner may reduce some uncertainty (Tong, 2013), but surveillance of an ex's social networking sites is associated with greater distress over the breakup, more negative feelings, and decreased personal growth (Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015). And in

general, communicating with former partners can have negative consequences on one's current relationship (Rodriquez et al., 2016).

Terminating a relationship is, for many people, a learning experience. Researchers (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003) asked college students who recently had a relationship breakup to describe the positive lessons from it that might help them in future relationships. Responses fell into four categories: "person positives," such as gaining self-confidence and recognizing that it's all right to cry; "other positives," such as learning more about what is desired in a partner; "relational positives," such as how to communicate better and how not to jump into a relationship too quickly; and "environment positives," such as learning to rely more on friends and how to better balance relationships and school work. And scholars note that although gaining *closure* might be an ideal for relational termination, finding *meaning* might be a more attainable and healthy goal (Frost et al., 2016).

A final way to explain the relational stages model is to identify conceptual opposites in coming together and coming apart. Table 10.1 color codes these pairings. For instance:

- Initiating is the opposite of Terminating—the difference between the *birth* and *death* of a relationship.
- Experimenting is about *engaging* while Avoiding is about *disengaging*.
- The *euphoria* of the Intensifying stage contrasts with the *boredom* of the Stagnating stage.

- In Integrating, partners *merge*; in Circumscribing, they *diverge*.
- Bonding is about officializing *We/Us*, while Differentiating (re)acknowledges *I/You*.

TABLE 10.1 Relational Stages Summarized

Coming Together	Coming Apart
INITIATING *Birth of Relationship*	DIFFERENTIATING *I/You*
EXPERIMENTING *Engaging*	CIRCUMSCRIBING *Diverging*
INTENSIFYING *Euphoria*	STAGNATING *Boredom*
INTEGRATING *Merging*	AVOIDING *Disengaging*
BONDING *We/Us*	TERMINATING *Death of Relationship*

This final pairing is at the heart of the next model in this chapter—dialectical tensions.

10.2.2 Dialectical Tensions

Not all theorists agree that relational stages are the best way to explain relational dynamics. Some maintain that it's possible for a relationship to have attributes of both "coming together" and

"coming apart" at the same time. Maintaining relationships, then, is about managing these competing goals. Scholars call these struggles **dialectical tensions**: conflicts that arise when two opposing or incompatible desires exist simultaneously in a relationship (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008).

Communication scholars have identified several dialectical forces that make successful communication challenging (Semlak & Pearson, 2011). Table 10.2 summarizes three that relational partners experience both *internally*—within the relationship—and *externally*—as you and the other person face the world. Although descriptors such as "struggles" and "conflicts" can make dialectical tensions sound negative, it's best to see them as normal and manageable factors in maintaining healthy relationships.

TABLE 10.2 Dialectical Tensions

	Integration–Separation	**Stability–Change**	**Expression–Privacy**
Internal Dialectic	Connection–Autonomy	Predictability–Novelty	Openness–Closedness
External Dialectic	Inclusion–Seclusion	Conventionality–Uniqueness	Revelation–Concealment

From Baxter, L. A. (1994). A dialogic approach to relationship maintenance. In D. J. Canary & L. Stafford (Eds.), *Communication and relational maintenance* (p. 240). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Integration versus Separation

Recognizing that no one is an island, humans seek out involvement with others. But you probably realize it's a mistake to sacrifice your entire identity to even the most satisfying relationship. The conflicting desires for connection and independence are embodied in the **integration–separation dialectic**. Sociolinguist Deborah Tannen (1986) captures this dialectic nicely by evoking the image of two porcupines trying to get through a cold winter:

> They huddle together for warmth, but their sharp quills prick each other, so they pull away. But then they get cold. They have to keep adjusting their closeness and distance to keep from freezing and from getting pricked by their fellow porcupines—the source of both comfort and pain.
>
> We need to get close to each other to have a sense of community, to feel we're not alone in the world. But we need to keep our distance from each other to preserve our independence, so others don't impose on or engulf us. This duality reflects the human condition. We are individual and social creatures. We need other people to survive, but we want to survive as individuals.

Internally (within a relationship), the struggle shows up in the **connection–autonomy dialectic**: You want to be close to others, but at the same time you seek independence (Kelley, 2021). The ability to manage the conflicting needs for connection and autonomy is basic to relational success (Kuburic, 2022). Some of the most common reasons for relational breakups involve failure of partners to satisfy one another's needs for connection: "We barely spent any time together"; "My partner wasn't committed to the relationship." But other relational complaints involve excessive demands for connection: "I was feeling trapped"; "I needed freedom" (Hui et al., 2013). One report suggests that couples who begin committed

relationships later in life value keeping separate residences as a means to maintain both connection and autonomy (Ansberry, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the tension between connection and autonomy (Park, 2020). For many people in lockdown together, increased contact meant both more quality time and more friction (Jones et al., 2021). In retrospect, some couples said the pros of connection outweighed the loss of autonomy during that season (Holmberg et al., 2021). A newly married woman described how the push-pull nature of the dialectic played out during weeks spent together, sheltering in place:

> We've only been married four months. Our friends half-joke that isolation is our "honeymoon." Some days, I snap at him for not closing the kitchen cupboard or cutting cheese with the jelly knife, or I'm just angry that he's in his tracksuit all day. But in the moments that I slip out of my vehement resistance to this coronavirus mode of living, I actually enjoy the time with him in our one-bedroom apartment. (Harris & Tarchak, 2020)

Mobile devices can create a connection–autonomy dilemma (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2016). Frequent interaction during the day via cell phone can be a means for building intimacy in a romantic relationship (Boyle & O'Sullivan, 2016). However, receiving too many texts and calls can feel imposing or even smothering. This is a source of conflict for many couples and may require some negotiation of "rules" (Campbell, 2022), such as "Please don't text me during job hours" or "I'll respond when the concert's over." These tensions occur in nonromantic relationships too. You can probably think of friends and family members who expect you to be always responsive via cell phone, yet you need some space from them (Eden & Veksler, 2016). This serves as a reminder that dialectical tensions exist in

most close relationships. In fact, Chapter 11 will look at how connection–autonomy is a central dialectic in managing family communication.

The tension between integration and separation also operates externally. In the **inclusion–seclusion dialectic**, a relational pair must reconcile a desire for both involvement with others outside the relationship and time together within the relationship. For example, at the end of a busy week, does a couple accept the invitation to a party (and sacrifice the chance to spend quality time with each other), or do they decline the invitation (and risk losing contact with

valued friends)? Does a close-knit nuclear family choose to take a vacation together (instead of visiting relatives), or do they attend a family reunion (losing precious time to enjoy each other without any distractions)? How does a just-married couple negotiate time demands with in-laws when inclusion–seclusion tensions typically run high (Prentice, 2009)? These are questions that need to be answered in all close relationships.

Stability Versus Change

The **stability–change dialectic** acknowledges that stability is an important need in relationships, but that too much of it can lead to feelings of staleness. The **predictability–novelty dialectic** describes how this operates within a relationship. Although nobody wants a completely unpredictable relational partner ("You're not the person I married!"), humorist Dave Barry (1990) exaggerates only slightly when he talks about the boredom that can come when partners know each other too well:

> After a decade or so of marriage, you know *everything* about your spouse, every habit and opinion and twitch and tic and minor skin growth. You could write a seventeen-pound book solely about the way your spouse eats. This kind of intimate knowledge can be very handy in certain situations—such as when you're on a TV quiz show where the object is to identify your spouse from the sound of his or her chewing— but it tends to lower the passion level of a relationship.

At an external level, the **conventionality–uniqueness dialectic** captures the challenges that people in a relationship face when trying to meet others' expectations while being true to themselves. On one hand, stable patterns of behavior do emerge that enable others to

make useful judgments such as “happy family” or “dependable organization.” But those blanket characterizations can stifle people in relationships who may sometimes want to break away from the expectations others hold of them. For example, playing the conventional role of “happy family” or “perfect couple” during a time of conflict can be a burden when the couple feels the need to behave in less stereotypical ways.

Expression Versus Privacy

Disclosure is one characteristic of interpersonal relationships. Yet, along with the drive for intimacy, people have an equally important need to maintain some space between themselves and others. These sometimes conflicting drives create the **expression–privacy dialectic**.

The internal struggle between expression and privacy shows up in the **openness–closedness dialectic**. What do you do in an intimate relationship when a person you care about asks an important question that you don’t want to answer? “Do you think I’m attractive?” “Are you having a good time?” “What’s my problem?” Your commitment to the relationship may compel you toward honesty, but your concern for the other person’s feelings and a desire for privacy may lead you to be less than completely honest. Many people claim, “There are no secrets between my best friend and me,” or “I tell my sweetheart everything,” but that’s likely an overstatement. Wise communicators make choices about what they

will and won't share with loved ones—sometimes (but not always) for the other person's sake (Goldsmith & Domann-Scholz, 2013).

The same conflicts between openness and privacy operate externally in the **revelation–concealment dialectic**. If you and a longtime fellow worker haven't been getting along, do you answer the boss's question, "How's it going?" honestly, or do you keep your disagreement to yourselves? If your family has had a run of bad (or good) financial luck and a friend asks to borrow (or lend) money, do you share your situation or keep quiet? If you're part of a same-sex couple, but you're not sure your relationship will be endorsed by others, when and how do you go "public" with that information (Suter et al., 2006, 2008)? All of these questions speak to tensions related to concealing versus revealing. These challenges have increased as social media make privacy boundaries more difficult to manage (Proudfoot et al., 2018). For a closer look at boundary management in families, see Section 11.2.3. (See Activity 2 for a self-appraisal of your dialectical tension tendencies.)

Watch and Discuss 10.1: "Couples Swap Phones and Go Through Each Other's History"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Consider the role of *relational dialectics* (particularly *openness–closedness*) in this exercise.

2. Discuss the ethics of privacy management in an interpersonal relationship.

10.3 Communicating About Relationships

By now it is clear that relationships are complex, dynamic, and important. In this section, we look at ways to improve relational communication. We start by revisiting an important principle of interpersonal communication discussed in Chapter 1: Every message has a *content* and a *relational* dimension.

10.3.1 Content and Relational Messages

The most obvious component of most messages is their content—the subject being discussed. The content of statements such as "It's your turn to do the dishes" or "I'm busy Saturday night" is obvious. In addition, however, every message—both verbal and nonverbal—also has a second, relational dimension, which makes statements about how the communicators feel toward one another (Watzlawick et al., 1967; see also Bavelas, 2021). These relational messages deal with one or more social needs: intimacy, affinity, respect, and control. Consider the examples we just mentioned:

- Imagine two ways of saying “It’s your turn to do the dishes”—one that is demanding and another that is matter-of-fact. Notice how the different nonverbal messages make statements about how the sender views control in this part of the relationship. The demanding tone says, in effect, “I have a right to tell you what to do around the house”; whereas the matter-of-fact one suggests, “I’m just reminding you of something you might have overlooked.”
- You can easily imagine two ways to deliver the statement “I’m busy Saturday night,” one with little affection and the other with much liking.

Most of the time communicators are unaware of the relational messages that bombard them every day. Sometimes these messages match your belief about the amount of control, liking, or intimacy that is appropriate in a relationship. For example, you probably won’t be offended if your boss tells you to drop everything and tackle a certain job because you agree that supervisors have the right to direct employees. However, if your boss delivered the order in a condescending, sarcastic, or abusive tone of voice, you would probably be offended. Your complaint wouldn’t be with the order itself but with the way it was delivered. “I may work for this company,” you might think, “but I’m not your servant or a fool. I deserve to be treated like a human being.”

Exactly how are relational messages communicated? As the boss–employee example suggests, they’re usually expressed nonverbally, often through tone of voice. To test this fact for yourself, imagine

how you could act while saying, “Can you help me for a minute?” in a way that communicates each of the following relationships:

superiority	aloofness
helplessness	sexual desire
friendliness	irritation

Although nonverbal behaviors are a good source of relational messages, remember that they are ambiguous. The sharp tone you take as a personal insult might be due to fatigue, and the interruption you take as an attempt to ignore your ideas might be a sign of pressure that has nothing to do with you. Before you jump to conclusions about relational clues, it is a good idea to verify the accuracy of your interpretation with the other person: “When you cut me off, it seemed like you were angry with me. Were you?”

Social scientists use the term **metacommunication** to describe messages that refer to other messages (Hristova et al., 2022). In other words, metacommunication is communication about communication. Whenever you discuss a relationship with others, you are metacommunicating: “I wish we could stop arguing so much,” or “I appreciate how honest you’ve been with me.” The Focus on Research sidebar in this section describes how metacommunication can help online discussions run more smoothly.

Metacommunication isn't just a tool for handling problems. It's also a way to reinforce satisfying aspects of a relationship: "I really appreciate it when you compliment me about my work in front of the boss"; "Thanks for hearing me out before responding." Comments like these serve two functions. They let others know that you value their behavior, and they boost the odds that others will continue the behavior in the future.

Despite its importance, overt metacommunication isn't a common feature of many relationships. In fact, there seems to be an aversion to it, even among many intimates (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Zhang & Stafford, 2008). For example, people are often reluctant to discuss the state of their current relationships and the norms that govern their lives together. Nevertheless, there are times when it becomes necessary to talk about what is going on between you and the other person (Knopp et al., 2020). And research shows that metacommunication can play a vital role in relational maintenance and repair (Becker et al., 2008).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Metacommunication in Online Discussions

Metacommunication—communicating about the way you communicate—is a relationship enhancer in face-to-face conversations. Communication scholars conducted a study to see if this skill can enhance online discussions as well.

The researchers created a social media post on a controversial topic, followed by three different comment

sections. One set of comments was a civil discussion; a second set was uncivil. A third set added some metacommunication at the end of the uncivil comments. Here's a sample of metacommunicative responses:

- Hey, what's happening here? I'm really disappointed about the way this conversation is being handled. This is an important topic for everyone, but let's just be respectful about how we are addressing each other.
- OMG. Yes, you read my mind, Paul. Thanks for saying something. Let's have a civilized conversation.
- Yes please! No need for insults.

Not surprisingly, respondents said they'd be most likely to join the civil discussion. They reacted positively to the comments denouncing incivility, and metacommunication led them to be more willing to enter the less-civil conversation.

The next time you're in a heated conversation on social media, consider intervening with some metacommunication about the conversational tone. You might help restore civility—and perhaps maintain some relationships in the process.

Molina, R. G., & Jennings, F. J. (2018). The role of civility and metacommunication in Facebook discussions. *Communication Studies, 69,* 42–66.

10.3.2 Maintaining and Supporting Relationships

Just as gardens need tending, cars need tune-ups, and bodies need exercise, relationships need ongoing maintenance to keep them successful and satisfying (Dainton & Myers, 2020). And when the chips are down, healthy interpersonal relationships offer the support everybody needs sooner or later (Lakey, 2013).

Relational Maintenance

As noted earlier, relational maintenance can be defined as communication that keeps relationships running smoothly and satisfactorily. What kinds of communication help maintain relationships? Researchers have identified several strategies that couples use to keep their interaction satisfying (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013):

- *Positivity*. Keeping the relational climate polite and upbeat and also avoiding criticism. ("Congrats on the promotion—I'm really happy for you")
- *Openness*. Talking directly about the nature of the relationship and disclosing your personal needs and concerns. This includes metacommunication, as discussed in the preceding section. ("I'd like to spend more time together. Can we discuss that?")

- *Assurances*. Letting the other person know—both verbally and nonverbally—that they matter to you and that you are committed to the relationship. ("I'm here for you when you want to talk about it")
- *Social networks*. Being invested in each other's friends and family. ("How's your brother doing?")
- *Sharing tasks*. Helping one another take care of life's chores and obligations. ("I'll be there on Saturday to help you move")

These maintenance strategies aren't just for romantic relationships. One study analyzed college students' email to see which maintenance approaches they used (Johnson et al., 2008). With family and friends, two strategies were used most: openness ("Things have been a little hectic for me lately") and social networks ("How are you and Sam? Hopefully good"). With romantic partners, however, assurances ("This is just a little email to say I love you") were the most-used maintenance devices. (See the Assessing Your Communication quiz at the end of the chapter to assess your typical maintenance style.)

An analysis of parents' messages to first-year college students demonstrates that relational maintenance strategies can be perceived in a variety of ways (Aloia & Strutzenberg, 2020). Students said they appreciated openness, assurances, and social network messages from their parents. These maintenance strategies helped relieve academic stress. On the other hand, students weren't so keen on parental positivity. The researchers speculated that upbeat messages such as, "You're doing great—keep it up!" raise expectations that also raise

stress. When engaging in relational maintenance, it's important to remember how your messages might be perceived by the other party. And perhaps some metacommunication might help: "When I hear those compliments, Mom, I worry about disappointing you."

Chapter 2 describes how mediated communication has been a game-changer for relational maintenance (Sprecher et al., 2019). Couples in long-distance relationships have found that regular text messaging enhances their relational satisfaction (Holtzman et al., 2021). Messages don't have to be long to be meaningful. Quick check-in texts such as "Just saying hi" are appreciated by friends more than most people realize (Liu et al., 2023). And consider all the family and friends you keep up with through social media, sometimes masspersonally ("Hey everyone, I got the scholarship!"; "Thanks so much for all the birthday greetings"). It's hard to remember that once upon a time, long-distance relationships were maintained primarily though snail mail and expensive phone calls. It's no overstatement to say that mediated communication has expanded our relational worlds.

Social Support

Whereas relational maintenance is about keeping a relationship thriving, **social support** is about helping others during challenging times by providing emotional, informational, or instrumental resources (MacGeorge et al., 2011). Social support has been consistently linked to physical and relational health (Floyd et al., 2018) and can be offered in a variety of ways:

- *Emotional support*: Few things are more helpful during times of stress, hurt, or grief than a loved one who listens with empathy and responds in caring ways (Reis & Clark,

2013). Chapter 8 describes what supporting does and doesn't sound like when responding to others' emotional needs. It's important to keep your message *person centered* (Rains & High, 2021)—that is, focused on the emotions of the speaker ("this must be so difficult for you") rather than minimizing those feelings ("it's not the end of the world") or diverting attention ("tomorrow is a new day").

- *Informational support*: The people in your life can be helpful information sources (Aloia & McTigue, 2019). They can offer recommendations for shopping, advice about relationships, or observations about your blind spots. Keep in mind that advice is most likely to be regarded as supportive when it's wanted and requested by the person in need.
- *Instrumental support*: Sometimes support is best given by rolling up your sleeves and doing a task or favor to show that you care (Semmer et al., 2008). This can be as simple as a ride to the airport or as involved as caregiving during illness. You count on loved ones to offer assistance in times of need, and instrumental support is a primary marker of a meaningful friendship ("a friend in need is a friend indeed").

Sometimes just being available for interaction can provide social support. One study found that patients who texted with friends after getting out of surgery required less pain medication that those who didn't (Guillory et al., 2015). It wasn't just a matter of distraction, because playing video games didn't have the same analgesic effect for the patients. The researchers maintain that interpersonal interaction —even via texting—offers social support and a measure of pain relief.

This serves as a reminder that the simple act of communicating with others when they're hurting is an act of kindness that can help.

10.3.3 Repairing Damaged Relationships

Sooner or later, even the most satisfying and stable relationships hit a bumpy patch. Some problems arise from outside forces: work, finances, competing relationships, and so on. At other times, problems arise from differences and disagreements within the relationship. Chapter 12 offers guidelines for dealing with these sorts of challenges. A third type of relational problem comes from **relational transgressions**, when one partner violates the explicit or implicit terms of the relationship, letting the other one down in some important way (Miczo et al., 2018).

Types of Relational Transgressions

Table 10.3 lists some types of relational transgressions. Violations such as these fall into different categories (Guerrero & Bachman, 2008; Niehuis et al., 2019):

- *Minor Versus Significant*. Some of the items listed in Table 10.3 aren't inherently transgressions, and in small doses they can actually aid relationships. For instance, a *little* distance can make the heart grow fonder, a *little* jealousy can be a sign of affection, and a *little* anger can start the process of

resolving a gripe. In large and regular doses, however, these acts become serious transgressions that can damage personal relationships. When transgression severity is perceived as high, and the perceiver's communication competence is low, rumination increases and relational closeness decreases (Robbins & Merrill, 2014).

- *Social Versus Relational.* Some transgressions violate *social rules* shared by society at large. For example, almost everyone would agree that ridiculing or humiliating a friend or family member in public is a violation of a fundamental social rule regarding saving others' face. Other rules are *relational*—unique norms constructed by the people involved. For instance, some families have a rule stating, "If I'm going to be more than a little bit late, I'll let you know so that you don't worry." Once such a rule exists, failure to honor it feels like a violation, even though outsiders might not view it as such.
- *Deliberate Versus Unintentional.* Some transgressions are unintentional. You might reveal something about a friend's past without realizing that this disclosure would be embarrassing. Other violations, though, are intentional. In a fit of anger, you might purposely lash out with a cruel comment, knowing that it will hurt the other person's feelings.
- *One-Time Versus Incremental.* The most obvious transgressions occur in a single episode: an act of betrayal, a verbal assault, or walking out in anger. But more subtle

transgressions can occur over time. Consider emotional withdrawal: Sometimes people retreat into themselves. If the withdrawal slowly becomes pervasive, it becomes a violation of the fundamental rule in most relationships that partners should be available to one another.

TABLE 10.3 Some Types of Relational Transgressions

Category	Examples
Lack of Commitment	Failure to honor important obligations (e.g., financial, emotional, task related) Self-serving dishonesty Unfaithfulness
Distance	Physical separation (beyond what is necessary) Psychological separation (avoidance, ignoring)
Disrespect	Criticism (especially in front of third parties)
Problematic Emotions	Jealousy Unjustified suspicion Rage
Aggression	Verbal hostility Physical violence

Strategies for Relational Repair

Research confirms the commonsense notion that a first step to repairing a transgression is to talk about the violation (Miczo et al., 2018). Section 6.3.2 offers tips for sending clear, assertive "I-messages" when you believe you've been wronged ("I was really embarrassed when you yelled at me in front of everybody last night"), whether describing the outcomes of the transgression or asking for an apology (Peyton & Goei, 2013).

In other cases, you might be responsible for the transgression and want to raise it for discussion: "What did I do that you found so hurtful?" "Why was my behavior a problem for you?" Asking questions such as these—and listening nondefensively to the answers—can be an enormous challenge. Chapter 8 offers guidelines for listening, and Chapter 13 provides tips for creating a supportive communication climate.

@WORK

Relational Repair on the Job

When workers make mistakes that affect others, there's often a need for relational repair. Stanford University's Emma Seppala (2015) maintains that compassion trumps toughness when responding to employee and coworker mistakes.

Seppala cites studies showing that lashing out when things go wrong erodes workplace loyalty. And when employees work in a climate of fear and anxiety, they're not as creative or

productive. By contrast, showing compassion builds interpersonal and professional bonds. This isn't to suggest that mistakes should be overlooked; rather, there are better and worse ways to call them out and repair the damage.

Here are Seppala's suggestions for addressing professional infractions. Although they're geared for managers, the principles are helpful for any workplace relationships:

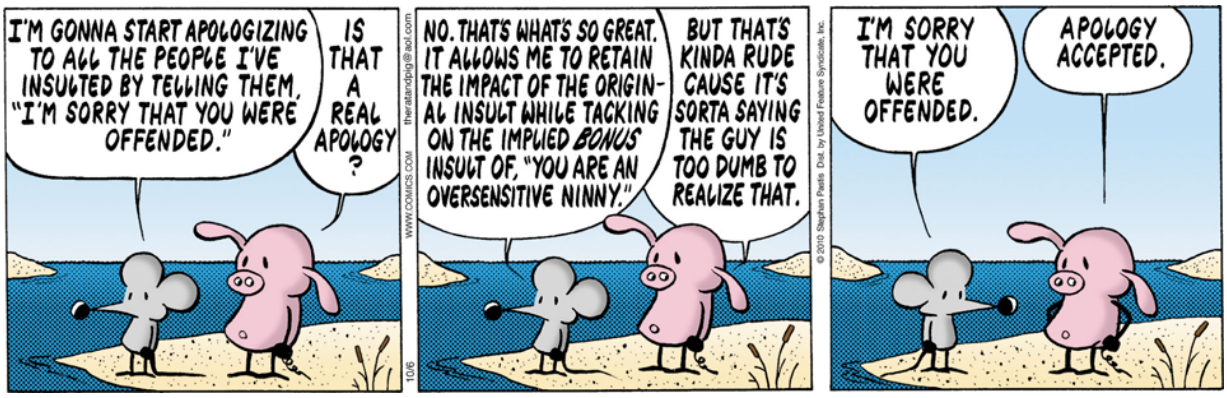
1. *Take a moment*. Rash reactions to mistakes will likely leave relational scars. By stepping back and taking time to reflect, you'll allow for a more thoughtful response.
2. *Put yourself in the other's shoes*. Keep in mind what it's like when you've made a mistake on the job, and try to have empathy for the offender's plight. This is especially important for company veterans working with newcomers.
3. *Forgive*. It's in everyone's best interest to treat transgressors with grace. One supervisor described it this way: "It's not that I let them off the hook, but by choosing a compassionate response when they know they have made a mistake, they are not destroyed, they have learned a lesson, and they want to improve for you because you've been kind to them."

For the best chance of repairing a seriously damaged relationship, an apology needs to be offered. Here are the top three things people

look for in an apology, in order of importance (Lewicki et al., 2016; see also Bippus & Young, 2020):

1. Acknowledgment of responsibility: "It was my fault; I acted like a selfish jerk."
2. Offer of repair: "I'll fix what I did and make things right."
3. Expression of regret: "I'm really sorry. I feel awful for letting you down."

As the cartoon in this section illustrates, some apologies are less than sincere. Scholar Janet Bavelas (2021) suggests that "I'm sorry that you feel that way" or "I'm sorry that you were hurt" aren't really apologies because they fail to take responsibility. As a rule of thumb, apologies beginning with "I'm sorry that *you* …" are less likely to provide repair than those beginning with "I'm sorry that *I* …".


I'M GONNA START APOLOGIZING TO ALL THE PEOPLE I'VE INSULTED BY TELLING THEM, "I'M SORRY THAT YOU WERE OFFENDED."
IS THAT A REAL APOLOGY ?
NO. THAT'S WHAT'S SO GREAT. IT ALLOWS ME TO RETAIN THE IMPACT OF THE ORIGINAL INSULT WHILE TACKING ON THE IMPLIED BONUS INSULT OF, "YOU ARE AN OVERSENSITIVE NINNY."
BUT THAT'S KINDA RUDE CAUSE IT'S SORTA SAYING THE GUY IS TOO DUMB TO REALIZE THAT.
I'M SORRY THAT YOU WERE OFFENDED.
APOLOGY ACCEPTED.

Even if you offer an ideal apology, it may be unrealistic to expect immediate forgiveness. Sometimes, especially with severe transgressions, expressions of regret and promises of new behavior will only be accepted conditionally, with a need for them to be

demonstrated over time before the aggrieved party regards them as genuine (Merolla, 2008).

Given the challenges and possible humiliation involved in apologizing, is it worth the effort? Research suggests yes. Participants in one study consistently reported that they had more remorse over apologies they *didn't* offer than about those they did (Exline et al., 2007). If you need to make things right with someone you've offended, better to do so now than to regret that you didn't. (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter to build your skill at apologizing.)

Forgiving Transgressions

You might think that forgiveness is a topic for theologians and philosophers. However, social scientists have found that forgiving others has both individual and relational benefits (Knight, 2018). On a personal level, forgiveness can improve the physical and mental health of all parties involved (Rasmussen et al., 2019). Interpersonally, extending forgiveness to lovers, friends, and family can often help restore damaged relationships (Fincham & Beach, 2013). Moreover, most research shows that transgressors who have been forgiven are usually less likely to repeat their offenses than those who have not received forgiveness (Whited et al., 2010). (See Activity 4 for an ethical challenge about accepting apologies and forgiveness.)

Given that it's in your own best interest to be forgiving, it's wise remember these words from Richard Walters (1984), who saw

forgiveness as a choice requiring courage and continuous acts of will: “When we have been hurt we have two alternatives: be destroyed by resentment, or forgive. Resentment is death; forgiving leads to healing and life.”

Watch and Discuss 10.2: “The Power of Forgiveness”

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Describe the personal and interpersonal value of extending *forgiveness*.
2. Discuss the communicative role of the journal, mirror, and saying the words aloud in the exercise depicted in the video.

Note: There is a follow-up SoulPancake video: “Calling to Forgive a Loved One”

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 10.1 **Recognize the various reasons for entering into interpersonal relationships.**

Explanations for forming relationships with certain people include appearance (physical attractiveness), similarity, complementarity, rewards, competency, proximity, and disclosure.

Q: Which of the factors listed in this chapter best describe the bases of your most important interpersonal relationships?

Objective 10.2 **Describe the stages and dialectical tensions typically experienced in interpersonal relationships.**

Some theorists argue that interpersonal relationships may go through as many as 10 stages of growth and deterioration: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, bonding, differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating. Other models describe the dynamics of interpersonal communication in terms of dialectical tensions: mutually opposing, incompatible desires that can never be completely resolved. These dialectical tensions include

integration–separation, stability–change, and expression–privacy.

Q: Trace the stages of one of your important close relationships. What is its current stage, and where is it headed?

Q: Describe the relational dialectics that shape communication in your most important relationships. Which strategies are most effective for dealing with these tensions?

Objective 10.3 **Identify specific skills communicators can use to maintain and improve their interpersonal relationships.**

Relational messages sometimes are expressed overtly via verbal metacommunication; however, more frequently they are conveyed nonverbally.

Interpersonal relationships require maintenance to stay healthy. Relational partners should use positive and open communication that includes assurances and demonstrates commitment and that the relationship matters. Partners should invest in each other's social networks and share tasks. Interpersonal communicators should also offer social support in their relationships through the exchange of emotional, informational, and instrumental resources.

Some relationships become damaged over time; others are hurt by relational transgressions. Apologies and forgiveness are particularly important strategies for repairing damaged relationships.

Q: To what extent does your most important close relationship exhibit the kinds of positive and open communication described in this chapter? Identify transgressions you have made in this relationship. Is it necessary to repair these transgressions? How could you put the strategies described in this chapter into action?

ACTIVITIES

1. **Reflection:** Section 10.1 describes a variety of factors that lead to attraction in interpersonal relationships. See if you can identify relationships in your life (past or present) that began or are sustained by each of these factors:
    a. Appearance
    b. Similarity
    c. Complementarity
    d. Rewards
    e. Competency
    f. Proximity
    g. Disclosure
2. **Self-Appraisal:** Section 10.2 describes dialectical tensions at work in interpersonal relationships. Sometimes relational partners experience these tensions differently. Consider one of your close relationships and identify which of these internal dialectics each partner experiences more strongly:
    a. Connection–Autonomy (e.g., "I value autonomy more than my partner does")

b. Predictability–Novelty (e.g., "My partner likes routine more than I do")
c. Openness–Closedness (e.g., "We're both pretty open, disclosing people")

Share your appraisals with your partner and see if that person agrees. Do you have similar dialectical orientations in your other close relationships?

3. **Build Your Skill:** Think of a recent occasion in which an apology from you was in order (maybe you offered one; maybe you didn't). Construct an apology using all three of these components (see Section 10.3.3):
   a. Acknowledgement of responsibility
   b. Offer of repair
   c. Expression of regret

   What do you think such an apology would do for your relationship with that person? Which of the three components would be most difficult to share—and why?
4. **Ethical Challenge:** If you're on the receiving end of an apology like the one offered in Activity 3, what is your ethical obligation to accept that apology and offer forgiveness—especially if the transgression is still painful for you?

Assessing Your Communication: Relational Maintenance (Personal Practice)

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

avoiding

bonding

circumscribing

comparison level (CL)

comparison level of alternatives (CL_{alt})

connection–autonomy dialectic

conventionality–uniqueness dialectic

dialectical tensions

differentiating

experimenting

expression–privacy dialectic

inclusion–seclusion dialectic

initiating

integrating

integration–separation dialectic

intensifying

metacommunication

openness–closedness dialectic

predictability–novelty dialectic

relational maintenance

relational transgressions

revelation–concealment dialectic

social exchange theory

social support

stability–change dialectic

stagnating

terminating

CHAPTER 10 Flashcards

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

11
Communication in Close Relationships: Friends, Family, and Romantic Partners

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **11.1** **Identify the different types of friendships and the role communication plays in maintaining them.**
- **11.2** **Describe how communication creates and sustains relationships within families.**

11.3 Describe the ways in which love is expressed in romantic relationships.

HOW MANY CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS are you fortunate enough to have? Anthropologist Robin Dunbar (2021) suggests that humans have the capacity to be intimately connected with only about five people at a time. Dunbar believes you can maintain meaningful relationships with as many as 150 people, but the number of core relationships is much smaller. Your inner circle likely comes from some combination of the three categories described in this chapter: friends, family, and romantic partners. Take a moment to identify the closest relationships in your life right now and see if that's the case.

After considering your own close relationships, you probably realized that these categories aren't mutually exclusive. For example, you may have a friend who is like family to you (Tannen, 2016). Or maybe your sibling is one of your closest confidants (Passante, 2016). Take your inventory to the next level of intimacy—your 15 closest relationships—and you'll see it's still filled with romantic partners, family members, and close friends.

Building on the relational principles of Chapter 10, this chapter will do a deep dive on these three contexts of close relationships. Although there can be overlap, this chapter will treat friends, family, and romantic

partners as distinct and will analyze the unique characteristics of each—beginning with friendship.

11.1 Communication in Friendships

Type the word “friendship” into a web browser along with one of these phrases: “in songs,” “in movies,” “in TV shows.” You’ll see that popular culture is filled with references to friends and friendship. In fact, you can probably think of several artistic tributes to friendship on your own without searching online. We depict and celebrate these special relationships because they are central to what it means to be human.

But what exactly is a friend? Scholars have offered many definitions of friendships (Brandtzaeg et al., 2022; Hojjat & Moyer, 2017). Most of them include the notions that a **friendship** is a voluntary relationship that provides social support. Their voluntary nature may make friendships seem less binding and vital than family

commitments. However, studies have found that friendship is associated with good health, well-being, and happiness (Lu et al., 2021), and that it's a stronger predictor of those factors than relationships with family members (Chopik, 2017).

Based on years of collected data, Robin Dunbar (2021) identifies seven factors drawing people into friendship with each other:

- Similar language, dialect, and way of talking
- Similar geographical upbringing
- Similar education and career experiences
- Similar hobbies and interests
- Similar worldview (morals, religion, politics)
- Similar sense of humor
- Similar musical tastes (a surprising addition but confirmed in many studies)

Dunbar maintains that the more of these factors you have in common, the closer your friendship is likely to be (they're in no particular order of importance—any combination will work). Sadly, many Americans report having fewer close friends than they once did (Cox, 2021). And while 60 percent can identify a "best friend," that number is down from 75 percent three decades ago. But close friendships aren't the only meaningful ones, as you'll see now.

11.1.1 TYPES OF FRIENDSHIPS

Before reading further, identify three friends from distinct parts of your life—perhaps an old neighborhood pal, someone from work, and your BFF ("best friend forever"). Keep these three friends in mind as you read each of the following sets of dimensions. These categories will help you see that all friendships are not the same, and that communication patterns vary depending on the type of friendship.

Short Versus Long Term

Friends come in and out of our lives for a variety of reasons. Some friendships last for years or even a lifetime, while others fade or end because of life changes (such as graduating, moving to a new location, or switching jobs). Although modern technologies have decreased the likelihood that a friendship will end because of a long-distance move (Ruppel et al., 2018), some relationships falter or fail without face-to-face contact. Another reason some friendships may be short term is due to a change in values (Beck, 2015a). Perhaps you once had a group of friends with whom you enjoyed parties and nightlife, but as you grew out of that phase of your life, the mutual attraction waned. Take a moment to consider the three friends you identified earlier and where they fall on a short-term versus long-term continuum (you can do the same comparison for each of the following categories).

Task Versus Maintenance Oriented

Sometimes we choose friends because of shared activities: teammates in a softball league, coworkers, or fellow movie buffs. These types of friendships are considered task oriented if they primarily revolve around certain activities. By contrast, maintenance-oriented friendships are grounded in mutual liking and social support, independent of shared activities. Of course these categories overlap; some friendships are based in both joint activities and emotional support.

Low Versus High Disclosure

How much do you tell your friends about yourself? No doubt your level of disclosure differs from friend to friend. Some know only general information about you, whereas others are privy to your most personal secrets. The Social Penetration Model in Section 4.3.2 can help you explore the breadth and depth of your disclosure with various friends.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Making and Developing Friendships

Is there a recipe for developing a new friendship? Communication researcher Jeffrey Hall says three ingredients are time, talk, and shared activities.

Hall used surveys to track new friendships of people who had relocated to a new city, and also with first-year college students. He found that creating a casual friendship takes about 50 hours of time together. Becoming "real friends" takes 90 hours, and about 200 hours are necessary to forge a close friendship.

But time together isn't the only ingredient. You might spend hours each day with acquaintances at work or school and still not consider them friends. Another element of developing a friendship is to spend time with that person in a different setting, such as going out for coffee, seeing a concert together, or visiting each other's homes. Shared leisure activities are a sign that a friendship is deepening.

Quality of communication also plays an important role in creating and deepening a relationship. Close friendships are characterized by self-disclosure and discussing personal issues. But not all conversations need to be deep: Hall points out the value of everyday talk: "Catching up, checking in, and joking around" are important ways to maintain a friendship. Close friendships require both quantity and quality of communication.

Hall, J. A. (2019). How many hours does it take to make a friend? *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 36*, 1278–1296.

Low Versus High Obligation

There are some friends for whom we would do just about anything—no request is too big. We feel a lower sense of obligation to other friends, both in terms of what we would do for them and how quickly

we would do it. Our closest friends usually get fast responses when they ask for a favor, send a text, or need late-night help (Gillespie, Lever, et al., 2015).

Infrequent Versus Frequent Contact

You probably keep in close touch with some friends. Perhaps you work out, travel, or socialize together, or you FaceTime or Zoom regularly. Other friendships have less frequent contact—maybe an occasional call, text, or email. Of course, infrequent contact doesn't always correlate with levels of disclosure or obligation. Many close friends may see each other only once a year, but they pick right back up in terms of the breadth and depth of their shared information.

After reading this far, you can begin to see how the nature of communication can vary from one friendship to another. Furthermore, communication *within* a friendship can also change over time. Impersonal friendships can have sudden bursts of disclosure. The amount of communication can swing from more to less frequent. Low-obligation friendships can evolve into stronger commitments, and vice versa. In a few pages you'll read about types of communication that are common in virtually all good friendships. But for now, it's important to recognize that variety is a good thing.

Gender and Sex

Recall the first friend you ever had. If you're like most people, that person was probably the same gender as you. Young children are

often sorted into groups of boys and girls, and that typically influences their friendship choices into adolescence (Dunbar, 2021). But over time, gender and sex play a greater role in friendships.

A unique type of friendship that's gotten a lot of press is the *work spouse*: "a special, platonic friendship with a work colleague characterized by a close emotional bond, high levels of disclosure and support, and mutual trust, honesty, loyalty, and respect" (McBride & Bergen, 2015). Perhaps you've been in this sort of friendship with a treasured coworker. A survey of hundreds of colleagues revealed that most work spouses were heterosexual pairs of men and women, but that all sorts of gender identities and sexual orientations were possible: a gay man and a straight woman, for example. One researcher noted, "We had two straight men who called each other work spouses" (Jackson, 2017). Because these friendships blur personal–professional borders, it proved important for work spouses to define their nature explicitly (Miller-Ott, 2019). For instance, the heterosexual participants repeatedly mentioned the word "platonic" to communicate to themselves and to others the nature (and boundaries) of their friendship.

A very different kind of relationship goes by the label *friends with benefits* (FWB)—a popular term for friendships that include sexual activity (Machia et al., 2020). These relationships have become increasingly common and come in many varieties (Mongeau et al., 2019). Most participants say FWB provides an opportunity for sex with "no strings attached." In heterosexual FWB pairings, women are often more focused on being "friends," whereas men are more likely to be interested in the "benefits" (Lehmiller et al., 2011). As a result,

women may find FWB arrangements less satisfying than men do, both relationally and communicatively (Fahs & Munger, 2015). Some suggest that queer people are better at managing their FWB friendships because they're more adept at "communicating wants, needs, expectations, and boundaries in relationships" (Taylor, 2020).

Watch and Discuss 11.1: "Can Men and Women Be Just Friends?"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Consider the topics addressed in this video in terms of research on *gender and sex* in friendships. Do you agree or disagree with the conclusions in this video? Why?
2. Discuss the value of talking about (rather than ignoring or suppressing) feelings of attraction in close friendships.

Another category of close friendship that has received a good deal of attention is between gay men and straight women (Blair, 2019). Some have dubbed these pairings "natural allies" (Bering, 2014). Many straight women report that they value their friendships with gay men because (a) they often share interests, (b) the potential for

romantic complications is small or nonexistent, and (c) the women feel more attractive than they do around straight men (Russell et al., 2017, 2018). Gay men and straight women also trust romantic advice from each other more than from other sources. It appears that sexual attraction—or the lack thereof—is an important consideration in successful friendships (Gillespie, Frederick et al., 2015).

There are other friendship types based on gender, such as the affinity shared by members of the LGBTQ community (Boyer & Galupo, 2018). And as society moves in the direction of nonbinary and gender-fluid understandings of human sexuality, terms like "opposite-sex friendships" will be less helpful for describing the nuances of those relationships. But it's worth noting that gender and sex still play important roles in the negotiation of close friendships.

11.1.2 COMMUNICATION IN SUCCESSFUL FRIENDSHIPS

Friendships come with a set of expectations about how to communicate. We rarely discuss these assumptions, and we often become aware of them only when they aren't met. Communication scholars have found that **expectancy violations**—instances when others don't behave as we assume they should—are the source of many relational problems (Campbell, 2022). The following guidelines, culled from several studies (Hall, 2012; LaBelle & Myers, 2016), offer prescriptions on what most people expect from their

friends. You can judge the success of your friendships, at least in part, by seeing how closely you follow these prescriptions.

@WORK

Social Media Friendships with Coworkers

Search the phrase "social media and coworkers" and you'll find a host of articles about the pros and cons of friending and following workmates online. This kind of online sharing involves both risks and rewards.

On the positive side, social media can help create bonds by allowing colleagues to learn about each other's lives away from the job. "In some ways, social media have replaced team-building events that used to take place off-site," says one business owner. "You get to know the people you work with on a deeper level" (Goodman, 2014). That can help the company's bottom line, according to another executive: "The more relationships are built and fostered, the more productive the environment." In fact, you might be considered antisocial if you *don't* connect on social media with your colleagues.

Along with these benefits, online sharing with coworkers has its perils. Some experts believe the risks are so great that they categorically recommend against friending colleagues (Wu, 2017). Others (Carreau, 2019; Seymour, 2020) suggest proceeding with caution. Consider these guidelines as you think about sharing your personal life online with fellow workers:

Use lists and filters: You can manage your privacy somewhat by choosing what your coworkers do and don't get to see about

your personal life. It might be fine to share your triumphs on the tennis court, but it could be a career-killer to post about pounding Jell-O shots.

Remember, privacy isn't guaranteed: Even if you use filters, people who have less restricted access to your posts can sometimes share them with a broader audience. Think twice before you grouse about your colleague's bad jokes or your boss's hygiene habits.

Use good sense: Keep your audience—*all* of your audience—in mind as you choose what to share on social media. Before you hit "Post," imagine how your boss and most conservative coworkers (and your grandmother) would react if they saw your post. Self-monitoring is your friend.

These guidelines seem obvious, but most of us know people who have violated them. Don't be one of those people—for your job's sake. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for an ethical challenge about coworker friendships on social media.)

Keep in Touch

Sometimes the simplest forms of communication are ideal for maintaining a friendship (Liu et al., 2023). A texted emoji, a shared meme, a quick email, or a "Wish you were here" photo are all ways to let friends know you're thinking of them. Conversely, days and weeks with no contact can communicate (perhaps unintentionally) that you're not invested in the relationship. Good friends keep in regular touch in small but meaningful ways.

Share Joys and Sorrows

When you have bad news, you want to tell friends who will offer comfort and support (Vallade et al., 2016). When a friend has good news, you want to hear about it and celebrate. When sharing sorrows and joys with friends, it's often important how quickly and in what order the news is delivered. The closer the friendship, the higher the expectation for sharing soon. If a friend asks, "How come I'm the last to find out about your new job?" you may have committed an expectancy violation.

Share Laughs and Memories

A hallmark of a healthy relationship is shared laughter (Kurtz & Algoe, 2017). One study found that close friends have a distinctive laugh, and that people across cultures can pinpoint in seconds how intimate friends are by listening to them chortle together (Bryant et al., 2016). Another study found that friends regularly prod and deepen each other's memory banks (Iannone et al., 2017)—so much that "sharing a brain" is an accurate descriptor for the closest of friends (Angier, 2018). If you get together with longtime pals and laugh as you recount things you've done together ("Remember that time when we… ."), you can probably call your friendship a success.

Provide a Listening Ear

As you'll read in Chapter 13, listening is an important type of confirming message. Giving a friend your undivided attention and

the opportunity to vent is one way to show that you care (Kellas et al., 2015). Chapter 8 describes a variety of responses you can offer to a friend to demonstrate that you're listening and understanding.

Maintain Confidences

Betraying a confidence can injure, or even end, a friendship (Bello et al., 2014). When you share personal information with a friend, you expect that person to be discreet about what you said—especially when the information could damage your reputation or other relationships.

Lend a Helping Hand

The old saying "A friend in need is a friend indeed" is supported by studies showing that providing practical assistance is one of the most tangible markers of a friendship (Gillespie, Lever et al., 2015; Morelli et al., 2015). Need a ride to the airport, some help on moving day, or a quick loan until payday? These are the kinds of things we expect from friends.

Stand Up for Each Other

A loyal friend "has your back"—both when you're present and when you're not. Few things are more endearing than a friend who defends your rights, honor, and reputation. A friend will also celebrate your

achievements to others so you don't have to toot your own horn. (Social media can be a good outlet for this.)

Honor Pledges and Commitments

"You can count on me" and "I'll be there for you" are common friendship sentiments (Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013). These pledges, however, need to be backed up with actions. Whether it's showing up on time, attending a scheduled event, or fulfilling an agreement about a shared task, it's vital for friends to live up to their promises and obligations.

Treat Each Other with Respect

Sometimes we say the most hurtful things to people we care about the most (Zhang & Stafford, 2009). It's easy for banter in a friendship to slip into teasing that hurts and comments that sting (Jin, 2013). Good friends monitor their words and actions, making sure to communicate in ways that affirm the other person's dignity.

Have a Balanced Exchange

Social exchange theory (Section 10.1.4) tells us that the rewards of a relationship need to outweigh the costs. This is as true in friendships as it is in other close relationships (Haselton & Galperin, 2013). College students in one study identified "Don't take more than you give" as an important friendship rule (Baxter et al., 2001).

In the TV series *Stranger Things*, friends communicate their loyalty and support for one another in a variety of ways, including maintaining confidences, lending a hand, standing up for each other, and even apologizing and forgiving. ***What long-running friendships do you have, and how were those friendships forged?*** View larger image

Value Both Connection and Autonomy

Chapter 10 described how all interpersonal relationships struggle with competing needs for both closeness and independence. In essence, we have a need to spend time with our friends and to spend time away from them. Allow your friends space to develop their own identity and nurture other relationships—and also the freedom to make choices that might not match your own.

Apologize and Forgive

Sooner or later friends are bound to make the kinds of "relational transgressions" described in Section 10.3.3. As you read there, a good apology has several components, including *sincerely* expressing remorse, admitting wrongdoing, promising to behave better, and requesting forgiveness. When you're the one who has been wronged, granting forgiveness can help repair the friendship and leave you feeling better than holding a grudge (Merolla et al., 2017).

11.2 Communication in the Family

A few generations ago, “What is a family?” was an easy question to answer for most people. Common notions of a family in the Western world typically stressed shared residence, producing or adopting children by different-sexed adults, and a “socially approved sexual relationship” (Murdock, 1965). However, social scientists, lawyers, judges, theologians, and the public at large have broadened their understanding of family in the decades that followed.

A heartwarming example occurred when Wanda Dench invited her grandson to Thanksgiving dinner—but her text message accidentally went to a stranger. The young man who received the text, Jamal Hinton, told Ms. Dench she had the wrong number—but then asked if there was still a plate for him at the table. She welcomed him with open arms and he now joins her family for dinner every Thanksgiving (*see photo*). They also keep in touch throughout the year. “Family is more than blood,” says Dench. “It’s the people you want to be with” (Pelletiere, 2019).

Some notions of family extend beyond the usual definitions. Thanks to a misaddressed text message, Jamal Hinton is now considered a welcome member of the Dench family. ***Who do you consider members of your extended family?*** View larger image

After reviewing a century's worth of definitions, Kathleen Galvin and her colleagues (2019) define family broadly enough to include many types of relationships—including Jamal's and Wanda's. A **family** is a system with two or more interdependent people bound by commitment, legal or otherwise, who have a common history and a present reality and who expect to influence each other in the future. With this broader definition in mind, communication scholars contend that families are defined primarily through their interaction rather than through biological relationship or kinship systems (Suter et al., 2014).

11.2.1 CREATING THE FAMILY THROUGH COMMUNICATION

Families are based on, formed, and maintained through communication (Galvin, 2015). It's through communication that family members create mental models of family life, and through communication that those models endure over time and across generations (Vangelisti, 2022). Families may also create their own way of talking, as described here:

> Many of us have a secret language, the private lexicon of our home life. Perhaps you have a nickname from a parent that followed you into adulthood. Maybe you have an old joke or a shared reference to a song. Sometimes known as *familects*, these invented words, pet names, in-jokes, and personal memes swirl and emerge from the mess of lives spent in close quarters. (Hymes, 2021)

The following sections describe several ways that communication shapes and constitutes the family.

Family Narratives

Narratives are the stories we tell to describe our personal worlds. They are especially important in families, as they serve a variety of functions that include reinforcing shared goals, teaching moral values, and stressing family concerns (Kellas, 2018).

Family stories often have meaning that goes beyond the incident being recounted (Kellas & Horstman, 2015). Some might reflect beliefs about work ("I walked up the hill both ways, in the snow, barefoot"), family identity ("We've been leaders in this community

for decades"), and warnings ("You don't want to end up like so-and-so, do you?"). Narratives may reflect a family's view of how members relate to one another: "We help each other a lot," or "We are proud of our heritage." Others reflect values about how to operate in the world: "It's impossible to be successful without a good education," or "It's our responsibility to help others less fortunate than ourselves." Even dysfunctional families can be united by a shared narrative: "We're family, for better or worse—and it's usually for worse."

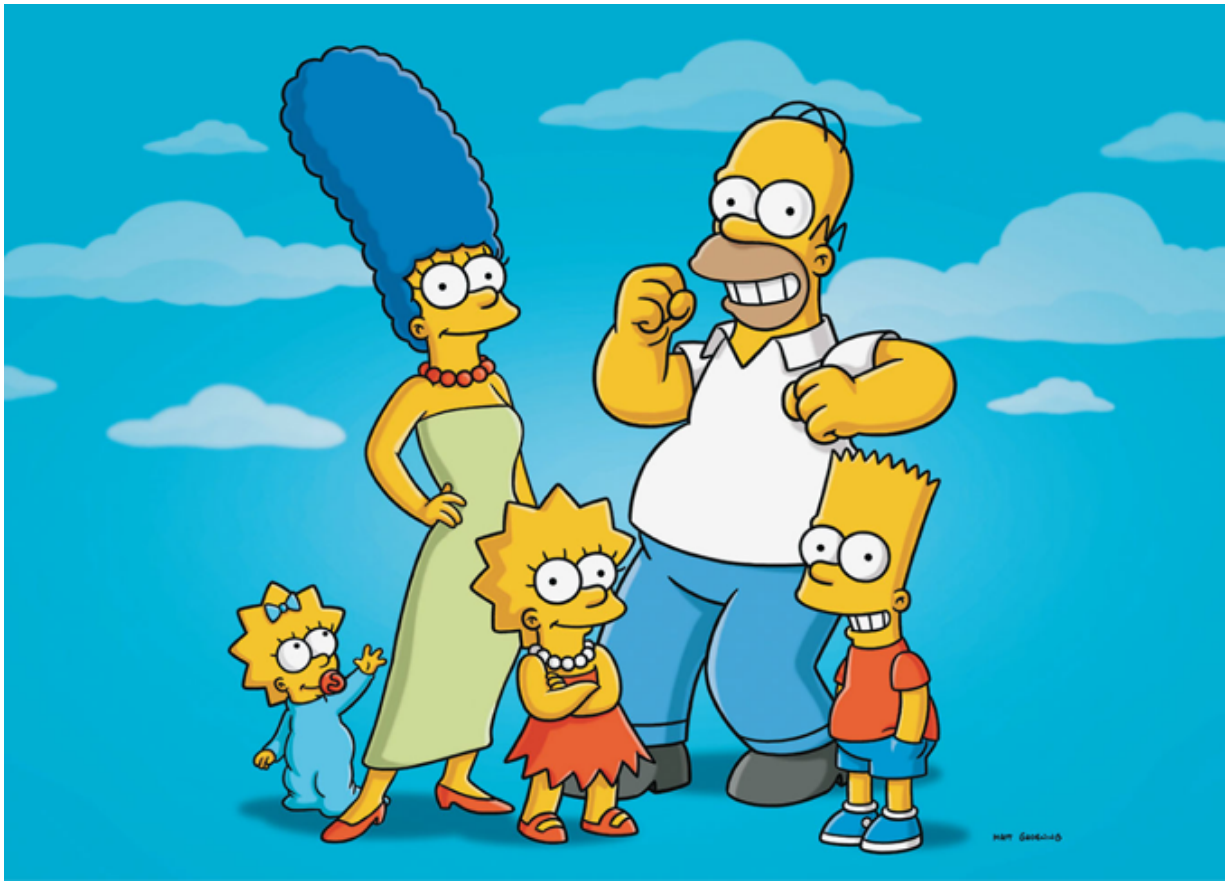
One study showed that families who regularly engage in positive storytelling (focusing on achievements and using "we" language) have high levels of family functioning and satisfaction (Kellas, 2005). These narratives are often remembered and relived. Newlyweds report that sayings of their parents ("Love doesn't just happen—it requires work") ring in their ears and offer them guidance (Jackl, 2016). More particularly, daughters remember stories their mothers told them about love, and they use that information to shape their own romantic relationships (Kellas, 2010). In other words, families narrate their best and worst life experiences and pass them down from generation to generation (Kiser et al., 2010).

Stop for a moment and think of a story you've heard—maybe several times—at your family gatherings. What does that narrative say about how your family operates? What is the underlying moral to the story? How has that influenced the way you see the world and communicate with others? It's quite likely you've been shaped by family stories more than you realize.

Communication Rituals and Rules

Rituals are another way family is created through communication (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006a). Some rituals center on celebrations: special family meals, certain types of gifts, the post-Thanksgiving touch football game, and so on. Other rituals are part of everyday life: good-natured teasing about family members' quirks, or saying "I love you" at the end of every phone conversation. Many families have "kinkeepers" who take charge of enacting family rituals (Braithwaite et al., 2017). They're the ones who typically plan and remind family members about birthdays, graduations, trips, holidays, and memorial services. Contemporary kinkeepers often keep up family rituals through mediated channels, such as Zoom calls on holidays or online game playing (Abel et al., 2021).

Rituals aren't the only way that families create their own communication systems. As unique cultures, families also have their own rules about a variety of communication practices. Some communication rules are explicit: "If you're going to be more than a half hour late, phone home." Other rules aren't ever discussed, but they are just as important: "If Mom slams the door after coming home from work, wait until she's had time to relax before speaking to her." Some rules govern communication within the family (Caughlin & Petronio, 2004): How far is it okay to push challenges of parental decisions? What kinds of language are allowed and forbidden? How much kidding and teasing are acceptable? Are there any forbidden topics?



Consider the stereotypical family roles in the long-running TV series *The Simpsons*: the oafish father, the kindly mother, the mischievous son, the responsible daughter. ***How would you characterize their communication rituals, rules, and patterns?*** View larger image

One study (Baxter & Akkoor, 2011) showed that some topics of conversation are allowed and encouraged in most families, whereas others are discouraged, if not off limits. For example, both parents and children agreed that conversations about friendships and everyday matters were fine. On the other hand, topics related to sex, drinking, money, and how teens were doing academically fell into the second group. The discussions of family patterns and boundaries in the following sections shed light on how families communicate about delicate subject matter.

A timely topic for family rules involves the use of mobile devices. The potential dangers of smartphones for teens have been well-documented (see Section 2.1.3), leading many parents to create rules about when, where, and even if their children are allowed to use them (Caron, 2021). Other research has called out the dangers of distracted parenting, noting that phone-focused adults may inhibit their children's development and impair family relationships (Yabroff, 2022). Experts suggest that family members jointly negotiate policies such as "No phones at the dinner table" or "Mobile devices off when children are in the room" that encourage interaction and avoid distraction.

See if you can identify the rituals and rules in your family of origin (Activity 2 at the end of this chapter addresses these issues). How are they communicated? How are they enforced, and what happens when they're violated? How have they affected the way you communicate with those outside your family, such as roommates?

11.2.2 PATTERNS OF FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Whatever form families take, the communication that occurs within them shares some important characteristics, which we examine now.

Families as Communication Systems

Every family has its own unique ways of communicating. Despite these differences, all families are **systems**: groups whose members interact with one another to form a whole. Families, like all systems, possess a number of characteristics that shape the way members communicate (Galvin et al., 2019):

- *Family Members Are Interdependent* If you touch one piece of a hanging sculpture or wind chime, all the other parts will move in response. In the same way, one family member's feelings and behaviors affect all the other members. If, for example, one family member leaves home to marry, or feuding siblings stop talking to one another, or a parent develops Alzheimer's disease (Miller-Ott et al., 2022), the system is no longer the same. Roles and rules get renegotiated ("You can't talk to him that way anymore") and the family system recalibrates.
- *A Family Is More Than the Sum of Its Parts* Even if you knew each member separately, you still wouldn't understand the family system until you saw the members interact. When those members are together, new ways of communicating emerge. For instance, you may have known friends who turned into very different people when they became a couple. Maybe they became better as individuals—more confident, clever, and happy. Or perhaps they became more aggressive and defensive. Likewise, the nature of a couple's relationship is likely to change when a child arrives, and that family's

interaction will change again with the arrival of each subsequent baby.

- *Families Have Systems within the Larger System* Like boxes within boxes, families have subsystems (systems within the family). For example, a family of four can have six communication subsystems with two people: parent A and parent B, parent A and child A, parent A and child B, parent B and child A, parent B and child B, and child A and child B. If you add three-person subsystems to these six, the number of combinations is even greater. The nuclear family itself is a subsystem of larger suprasystems (systems of which the family is a part) that include siblings of parents, cousins, grandparents, in-laws, and so on.

A study investigated the systemic nature of family interaction (Galovan et al., 2014). Spouses reported higher marital quality when

they were equally responsible for family tasks. Which shared task best predicted marital satisfaction? Responsibility for child rearing. In other words, if parents want to improve their relationship with each other, one way to do so is to be more invested in the care of their children. A change in one part of the family system (parent–child interaction) affects other parts of the system (spouse–spouse interaction).

Conversation and Conformity in the Family

Communication researchers (Koerner & Schrodt, 2014; Horstman, et al., 2018) have identified two categories of rules about communication in the family: conversation and conformity.

Conversation orientation involves the degree to which families favor an open climate of discussion on a wide array of topics. Families with a high conversation orientation interact freely, frequently, and spontaneously, without many limitations regarding topic or time spent interacting. By contrast, members of families with a low conversation orientation do not often interact or discuss their thoughts and feelings with one another.

Conformity orientation refers to how much a family stresses uniformity of values, beliefs, and attitudes. High-conformity families seek harmony, interdependence, and obedience. They are often hierarchical, with a clear sense that some members have more authority than others. By contrast, communication in families with a low conformity orientation is characterized by individuality, independence, and equality.

Conversation and conformity orientations can combine in four ways, as shown in Figure 11.1. Each of these modes reflects a different **family communication pattern**: typical interaction processes described as consensual, pluralistic, protective, or laissez-faire. To understand these combinations, imagine four different families. In each, a 15-year-old daughter wants to get a very visible and irreverent tattoo that concerns the parents. Now imagine how communication surrounding this issue would differ depending on the various combinations of conversation and conformity orientations:

- *Consensual* families are high in both conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Communication in these families reflects the tension between the pressure to agree and preserve the hierarchy, and an interest in open communication and exploration. In a consensual family, the daughter would feel comfortable making her case for the tattoo, and the parents would be willing to hear the daughter out. Ultimately the decision would rest with the parents.
- *Pluralistic* families are high in conversation orientation and low in conformity orientation. Communication in these families is open and unrestrained, with all family members' contributions evaluated on their own merits. It's easy to visualize an ongoing family discussion about whether the tattoo is a good idea. Older and younger siblings—and maybe even other relatives—would weigh in with their perspectives. In the best of worlds, a decision would emerge from these discussions.

- *Protective* families are low in conversation orientation and high in conformity orientation. Communication in these families emphasizes obedience to authority and the reluctance to share thoughts and feelings. In a protective family, there would be little if any discussion about the tattoo. The parents would decide, and their word would be final.
- *Laissez-faire* families are low in both conversation orientation and conformity orientation. Communication in these families reflects family members' lack of involvement with each other, emotional distance, and individual decision making. In this type of family, the parents would have little to say about their daughter's desire to get a tattoo. With this issue—and most others—their response would be "Whatever" (if she even brought it up for discussion).

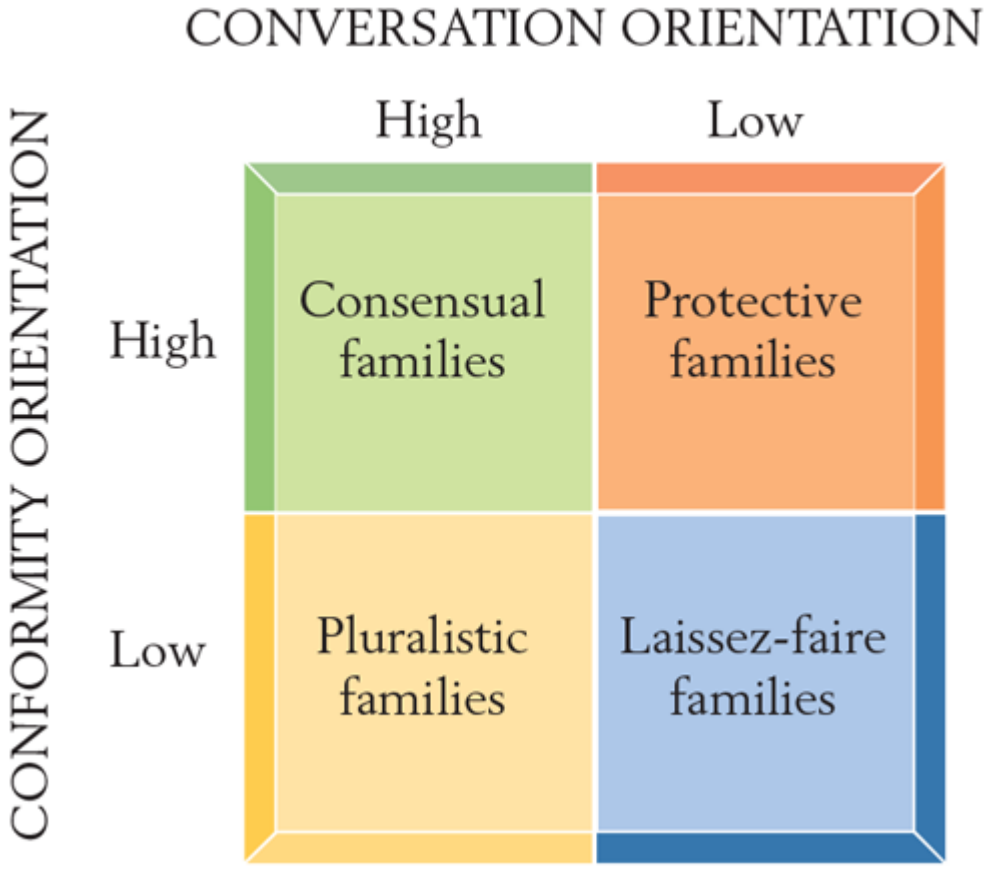


FIGURE 11.1 Family Communication Patterns View larger image

Which of these four patterns best represents your family? Which would you *like* to be true of your family? You can use the Assessing Your Communication quiz at the end of the chapter to help determine your family's communication pattern. As you complete the assessment, keep in mind that family members may disagree on how their family is classified (Baxter & Pederson, 2013), so it may be interesting to have each member of your family complete it. For the record, more families identify as consensual or pluralistic than as protective or laissez-faire (Keating, 2016).

A growing body of research suggests that some communication patterns are more productive and satisfying than others (Jiao et al., 2022; Schrodt & Shimkowski, 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, conversation-oriented families had higher quantity and quality of communication than did those with a conformity orientation (Hall et al., 2022). The conversant families were better equipped to talk through the challenges and changes to their family patterns brought on by the pandemic. By contrast, studies show that a protective parental approach leads to more emotional suppression in children (Shimkowski, 2016) and to lower satisfaction for all members of a family (Ledbetter & Vik, 2012). In high-conformity families, fathers tend to be confrontational and pressuring during conflicts, but they're more peacemaking and analytic in pluralistic ones (Sillars et al., 2014). In other words, open communication and shared decision-making produce better results than do power plays and refusal to have open dialogue.

11.2.3 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN FAMILIES

It's one thing to identify a family's communication pattern; it's another to improve it. This section identifies ways for families to better manage their communication.

Manage the Connection–Autonomy Dialectic

As you read in Chapter 10, dialectical tensions arise in relationships when two opposing or incompatible forces exist simultaneously. The connection–autonomy dialectic is particularly challenging for families with teens who are emerging into adulthood (Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018).

As children grow into adolescents, the "leave me alone" orientation becomes apparent. Teenagers who used to happily spend time with their parents now may groan at the thought of a family vacation, or even the notion of sitting down at the dinner table each evening. They spend more time alone or with friends. Families who are most successful at negotiating this difficult period tend to be those with high flexibility—who, for example, can change how they discipline and how they determine family roles. Changing up communication practices can help, too. Psychologists suggest that text messaging or car chats offer low-friction (and low eye-contact) opportunities for teens to share their feelings (Manning-Schaffel, 2018). When they do, it's important for parents to listen empathically and go easy on advice.

In the Oscar-winning movie *CODA* (which stands for Children of Deaf Adults), Ruby (Emilia Jones) feels a connection–autonomy tension between staying home to help with her family's business and leaving for college to pursue a music degree. ***Have you felt a similar tension between personal and family needs?*** View larger image

When young adults move out of the family home, they need to consider how to stay connected. One study found that phone chats are an ideal way for college students to keep in touch with their parents (Sumner & Ramirez, 2019). Voice calls are more personal than texting but less involved than video chats or in-person visits. In fact, students who lived on campus but called home regularly reported greater communication satisfaction with their parents than did students who still lived at home. In another study, first-year college students reported that communication with their fathers had improved when they moved out (Rossetto et al., 2017). They said their dads became more supportive and expressive, and often less

controlling. Both studies suggest the need to balance connection and autonomy as family members launch out on their own.

Moving out has a ripple effect on the family of origin. Relationships between siblings often change at this stage. A study found that siblings may gain a newfound affinity once they are separated—and that communication sometimes increases, as "absence makes the heart grow fonder" (Halliwell, 2016). Dynamics also change among the family members still at home. For example, the parents and remaining children may need to renegotiate their task and social roles. (For example, if the child who moved out had helped resolve conflicts among family members, how will that happen now?)

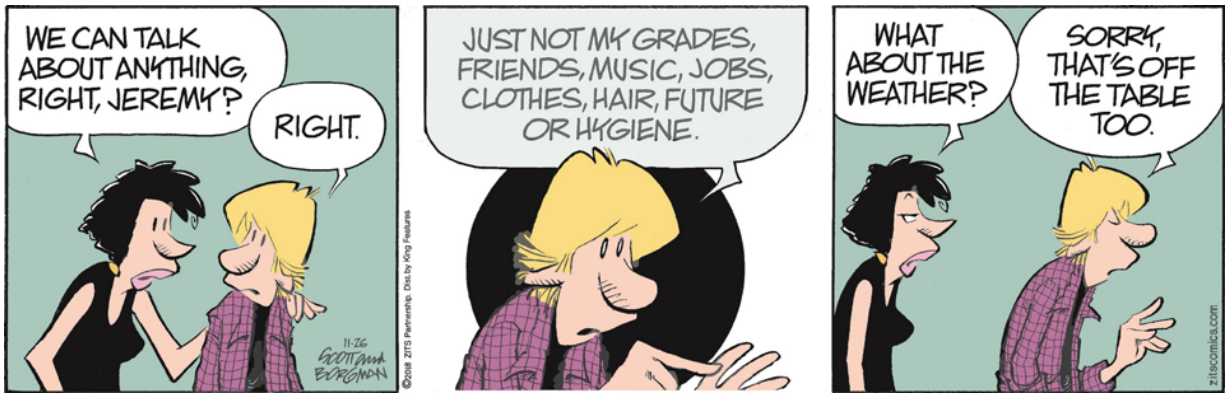
Finally, communication between older parents and their adult children provides its own set of challenges. In many families, interaction comes full circle, as the children must provide for their parents while simultaneously meeting the obligations of their jobs and their own immediate families (Amaro, 2017). Daughters who take care of older family members report being more satisfied when this relationship allows for autonomy—for instance, through separate quarters or time away (Semlak & Pearson, 2011). When there's too much connection, caretakers can lose their sense of freedom and identity.

Strive for Closeness while Respecting Boundaries

Section 10.2.2 also described the conflicting needs for both integration and separation in relationships, as well as for both

expression and privacy. Nowhere are these opposing drives stronger than in families. It's important to maintain close ties with kin, but too much cohesion can be a problem (Scharp & Hall, 2019).

Families cope with these dialectical tensions by creating **boundaries**—limits on family members' actions and interactions (Young & DeGroot, 2021). The most obvious boundaries are physical (e.g., don't enter a bedroom without knocking if the door is closed; stay out of the garage when Dad is tinkering with the car). Other boundaries involve conversational topics. In some families, discussion of politics or religion is off limits. In others, health issues are kept private (Ebersole & Hernandez, 2016). Sex is one of the most-avoided topics with parents and stepparents (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). Money is also a delicate subject in many families. Adult children who care for their parents report that boundaries about finances often remain "thick," even when caretakers need access to their parents' financial accounts (Plander, 2013).


WE CAN TALK ABOUT ANYTHING, RIGHT, JEREMY?
RIGHT.
JUST NOT MY GRADES, FRIENDS, MUSIC, JOBS, CLOTHES, HAIR, FUTURE OR HYGIENE.
WHAT ABOUT THE WEATHER?
SORRY, THAT'S OFF THE TABLE TOO.

Parental boundaries don't have to remain thick. Young adults in one study said they appreciate when parents let down their guard and

talk honestly about personal topics (Donovan et al., 2017). When a parent is willing to disclose about the loss of a job, a medical diagnosis, or an impending move, it communicates trust and enhances relational closeness with an adult child. But there are limits. You can imagine some secrets your parent might share that would make your hair stand on end ("Hey Mom, I didn't need to know *that*!"). Parents are encouraged to use discretion as they lower boundaries with their adult children (Shimkowski, 2018).

Adult children also maintain boundaries. Andrew Ledbetter (2019) studied privacy management strategies used by first-year college students with their parents. He identifed four patterns, determined by how frequently parents invade their adult child's space and how defensive that child is about privacy (see Figure 11.2). These conflict patterns can be described as *combative*, *guarded*, *surrendered*, and *trusting*. Surrendered relationships were most associated with psychosocial distress, suggesting it's healthy for adult children to maintain some interpersonal privacy. Although this grid was created for parent–child relationships, it's useful for describing any familial boundary patterns. "Invasions and defenses" may not sound ideal, but there are times when both are necessary for maintaining healthy communication (Faw et al., 2019.)

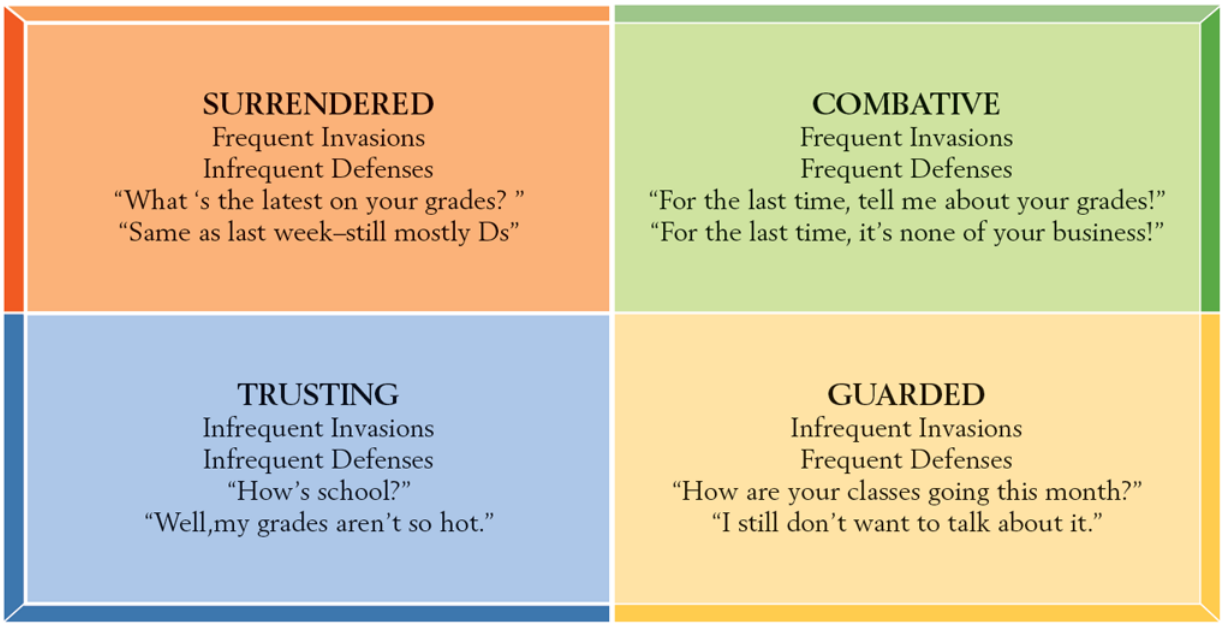


FIGURE 11.2 Family Boundary Patterns (Example: A parent asking adult child about college grades) View larger image

Encourage Confirming Messages

Section 13.2.1 describes the importance of confirming messages—ones that show in one way or another that we value the other person. Confirming messages from parents help satisfy a great many of their children's needs, such as the need for nurturance and respect. One researcher (Ellis, 2002) looked at the different ways parents communicate valuing and support to their children. She found that two highly confirming behaviors parents offer are (1) telling their children that they are unique and valuable as human beings and (2) genuinely listening. Two highly disconfirming behaviors are (1) belittling their children and (2) making statements that devalue their children's ideas: "Nobody asked for your opinion," or "What do you know about this anyway?"

Confirming messages are just as important for older children as for young ones. One study found a strong relationship between the amount of confirmation adolescents feel and the openness they exhibit in communication with their parents (Dailey, 2006). College students are more likely to reveal their risky behavior to their family members when they think the response is likely to be confirming (Aldeis & Afifi, 2013). This doesn't mean that parents must agree with every choice their child makes, but it's important to create a communication climate that allows for open, honest discussions—particularly once the child reaches adulthood (Donovan et al., 2017).

Siblings can also be a source of confirming messages. Research shows that sibling relationships can offer vital support across the lifespan (Hamwey et al., 2019), and thus it's important to maintain them through behaviors such as sharing tasks, expressing positivity, and offering assurances (Myers, 2003). Another way older siblings can nurture their relationships is by talking about their family: reminiscing about their childhood, funny family events, and wild relatives. Sharing these stories not only holds the siblings together, but also helps them clarify family events and validate their feelings and life choices (McGoldrick & Watson, 2016).

11.3 Communication in Romantic Relationships

Chapter 1 identifies numerous studies showing that interpersonal relationships promote mental, emotional, and physical health. One research review (Loving & Slatcher, 2013) more specifically describes the connection between *romantic* unions and well-being. In short, people in loving romantic relationships live longer, happier, healthier lives. Unfortunately, the ending of romantic partnerships—or being in distressed intimate relationships—is linked to increases in illness, depression, and even death rates.

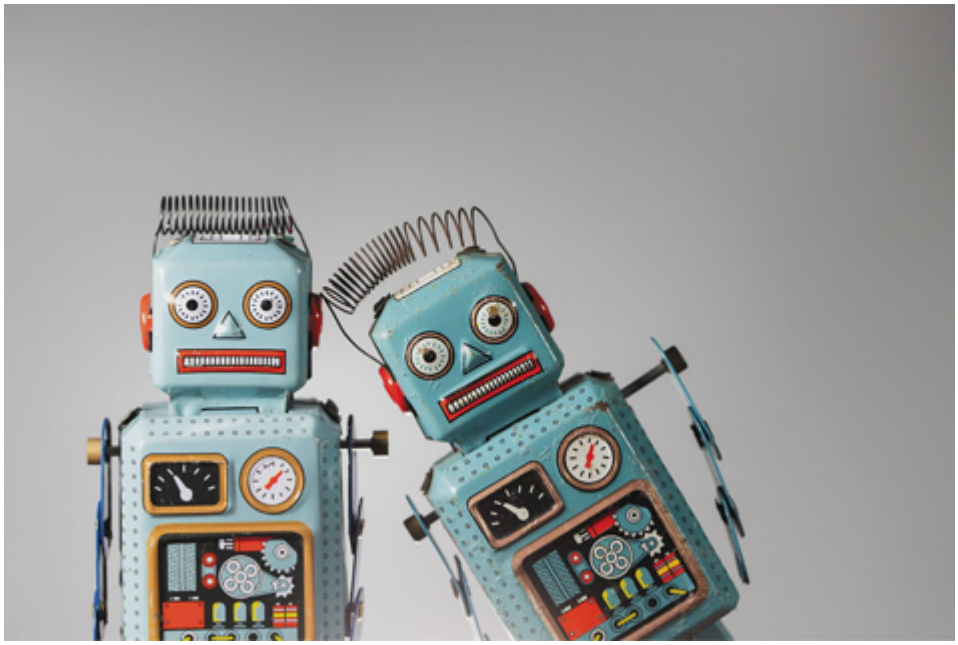
In a study of more than 2,200 participants recruited by couples' therapists and counselors, "communication" was rated the most important competency for ensuring success in romantic relationships—more than sex and romantic passion or any other factor (Epstein, Warfel, et al., 2013). Moreover, divorced couples cited "communication problems" as the primary challenge in their defunct marriages (Williamson et al., 2016). This section will focus on communication in romantic relationships, broadly defined as longer term, loving connections between partners. These relationships can include couples who are dating exclusively, partners who live together, and spouses who have been married for years. The crucial issue is whether the people involved identify themselves as being romantically connected.

11.3.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

“Are we ‘just friends’ or something more?” It’s not unusual for couples to ask questions such as this to determine if they’re moving into a romantic relationship. Although the lines of demarcation aren’t always clear, in this section we look at three characteristics that typify most romantic relationships: love, commitment, and affection. As you’ll see, these concepts overlap (for instance, commitment and affection are components of love in one of the models in this section). The three categories are used here as a way to focus on the research about each of these related topics.

Love

More than two millennia ago, Aristotle maintained that “Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.” His mentor, Plato, was a bit more cynical: “Love is a serious mental disease.” Philosophers and artists through the years have waxed eloquently about love, with mixed conclusions about its joys and sorrows.



Social scientists have studied love as well, recognizing that it's a force that draws most people into romantic relationships. One researcher (Fehr, 2013) puts it this way:

> Love plays a powerful role in people's lives, determining how satisfied they are in a relationship, how committed they are to it, and, at least in premarital relationships, whether or not the relationship continues.

A helpful model is Robert Sternberg's (2004) **triangular theory of love**. He maintains that love has three components:

> *Intimacy:* This is the closeness and connectedness one feels in a relationship. Intimacy can be found and expressed in all the relational contexts described in this chapter. Using temperature as a metaphor, Sternberg regards intimacy as the "warm" component of love.
>
> *Passion:* This involves physical attraction and emotional arousal, often including sexuality. This is the "hot"

component of love.

Commitment: This is the rational side of love, involving decisions to maintain a relationship over time (more on this later). This is love's "cool" component.

Figure 11.3 depicts these three components as corners of a triangle and identifies seven possible combinations resulting from their intersection. It's easy to imagine the communication patterns that accompany each form of love represented in the model. For instance, couples experiencing *romantic love* might exchange highly emotional messages ("I adore you" in a clutched embrace), with many displays of affection. This is the version of love that's often depicted in movies and TV shows (Kretz, 2019)—but it's not typical of everyday communication, even in the happiest of relationships. *Companionate love* would be more verbally and nonverbally subdued, with phrases such as "I enjoy your company" more typical. And *empty love* would be a shell of a relationship, void of most if not all affectionate messages described later in this section.

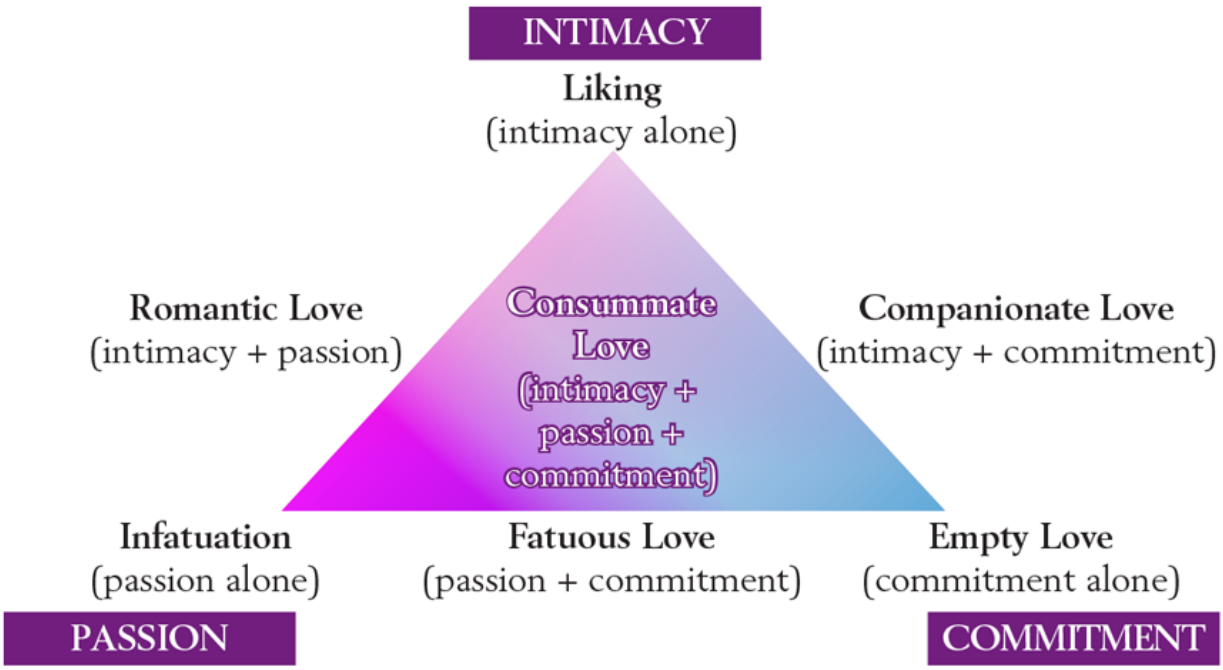


FIGURE 11.3 Components of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love View larger image

It's healthy for romantic couples to have both companionate and romantic affection for each other (Brooks, 2021). Sternberg acknowledges that *consummate love*—the combination of intimacy, passion, and commitment—is an ideal that's rare to achieve and challenging to maintain. Typically, love's components wax and wane over the course of a relationship. There can be rushes of passion on occasion; at other times, love is more a cool decision than a warm feeling. Maturity is also a factor in the experience of love. For instance, adolescents don't identify with the triangle components as well as adults do (Sumter et al., 2013). As couples age, they tend to value commitment more than the other components, although long-term partners experience more passion and intimacy than some stereotypes suggest (Acevedo & Aron, 2009).

If you consider romantic partnerships you've been in or observed, you can probably think of examples of all the types of love depicted in the triangular model. You can also likely see how the factors ebb and flow over time. Similar to the models of relational stages and dialectics described in Chapter 10, it's healthy to regard love as a dynamic and changing process rather than a static property.

Commitment

How important is the role of commitment in romantic relationships? Sentiments such as the following suggest an answer: "I'm looking for a committed relationship." "I'm just not ready for commitment." "I'm committed to making this relationship work."

Relational commitment involves a promise—sometimes implied and sometimes explicit—to remain in a relationship and to make that relationship successful. Commitment is a hallmark of relational satisfaction (Tran et al., 2019), but it isn't always easy to put into words. Unmarried young adults said that although they could readily identify meanings and expectations of a committed romantic relationship, they hesitated to talk about those desires with their partners (Konstam et al., 2019). Table 11.1 spells out communication-related commitment indicators in romantic relationships. As that table indicates, words alone aren't a surefire measure of true commitment. Deeds are also important. But without language, commitment may not be clear. For this reason, ceremonies formalizing relationships are an important way to recognize and

cement commitment (see Section 10.2.1's discussion of the relational stage of "Bonding").

TABLE 11.1 Major Indicators of Commitment in a Romantic Relationship

- Providing affection
- Providing support
- Maintaining integrity
- Sharing companionship
- Making an effort to communicate regularly
- Showing respect
- Creating a relational future
- Creating a positive relational atmosphere
- Working on relationship problems together
- Reassuring one's commitment

Source: Weigel, D. J., Etopio, A. L., Shrout, M. R., & Evans, W. P. (2020) The everyday communication of commitment: Testing an integrated model of self-construal, cognition, affect, motivation and communication. *Western Journal of Communication, 84,* 499–520.

Research shows that couples who regularly communicate their commitment—through words or actions—have more positive feelings about their relationship and experience less relational uncertainty (Weigel et al., 2011). Some of that communication is private; some is public. For instance, posting on a partner's social networking site can be a commitment marker, and a sign that the relationship has staying power (Toma & Choi, 2015).

A cultural note about commitment: It's a decidedly Western approach to view commitment as a culmination of romantic love (as the familiar chant goes, "First comes love, then comes marriage"). Many of the world's marriages are arranged, and their axiom is "first comes marriage, then comes love." In a study of satisfied couples in arranged marriages, "commitment" was identified as the most important factor that helped their love flourish over time (Epstein, Pandit, et al. 2013). The second most important factor was "communication," with a strong emphasis on self-disclosure as a means to learn to love one's mate. Regardless of the order, there is a strong relationship between commitment and communication in successful romantic relationships.

Affection

Expressions of affection—both verbal and nonverbal—are typical in romantic relationships. These can range from holding hands to saying "I love you" to sexual activity (Floyd et al, 2021). Romantic affection is often communicated privately; sometimes it's expressed publicly. In fact, the phrase "public displays of affection" has its own acronym (PDA) and social rules (Blair et al., 2022).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Affectionate Communication: It's (Even) Better to Give than Receive

A primary draw for being in a loving relationship is the opportunity to give and receive affection—a hug, a kiss, an "I

love you." Communication scholars led by Colin Hesse meta-analyzed 44 studies about affection to determine its impact on mental and physical health.

The researchers focused on affectionate communication—that is, "the enactment or expression of feelings of closeness, care, and fondness for another." By definition, it's not enough to *feel* affection; those feelings must be *communicated*. Not surprisingly, affectionate communication was found across studies to be linked with cardiovascular health, mental well-being, and stress reduction. Put simply, affection is good for the mind, body, and soul.

A finding that *was* surprising is that health benefits tended to be stronger for those expressing affection than for those receiving it. In light of this, the researchers suggest that if you're feeling low or a bit under the weather, it might be a good time to call a loved one and tell them you care, pen a love letter, or give a warm hug (as long as you're not contagious). Chances are good those expressions of affection will be good for both parties.

Hesse, C., Floyd, K., Rains, S. A., Mikkelson, A. C., Pauley, P. M., Woo, N. T., Custer, B. E., & Duncan, K. L. (2021). Affectionate communication and health: A meta-analysis. *Communication Monographs, 88,* 194–218.

Communicating affection is beneficial for romantic partners in a variety of ways (Hesse & Mikkelson, 2017). In one study (Floyd et al., 2009), married and cohabiting couples were asked to increase their amount of romantic kissing over a 6-week period. In comparison with a control group, the frequent kissers experienced improvements

not only in their stress levels and relational satisfaction, but also in their cholesterol counts. (You probably want to know how to sign up for studies like these.) A similar study found that married couples who increased their amount of cuddling enhanced their relational satisfaction (van Raalte et al., 2021). In terms of relational benefits, received affection works like a bank account—when a loved one has made plenty of deposits, the partner is more willing to overlook a transgression than when the affection account is depleted (Horan, 2012).

There can be discrepancies between feelings and expressions of affection. Perhaps you can recall times when you texted "Love u" despite not feeling very charitable toward your partner. Maybe you gave your partner a hug or a kiss in the midst of a disagreement, even though it didn't match your emotional state. Communication researchers call these acts of "deceptive affection" and say they're common in romantic relationships (Horan & Booth-Butterfield, 2013). Rather than being negative, deceptions of this sort can be a normal part of relational maintenance and support. Research shows that they may also be more powerful than you realize. Engaging in romantic actions, such as gazing into a lover's eyes, sitting at intimate distances, or sharing personal secrets, can often lead to romantic feelings, rather than the other way around (Epstein, 2010).

Sexual activity is an important means of expressing and receiving affection in most romantic relationships. The strongest and most reliable predictor of sexual satisfaction is relational satisfaction (Diamond, 2013). In other words, sex is most enjoyable as part of a healthy romantic relationship. Communication also plays an

important role: There is a strong correlation between a couple's communication skills and their sexual satisfaction (Byers, 2011). Contrary to some media depictions of passionate sex occurring in wordless vacuums, sexual activity is more satisfying when accompanied by direct verbal communication ("Here's how I feel"; "This is what I want"), both before and during the encounter (Theiss & Solomon, 2007). When post-sex "pillow talk" gets uncomfortable, satisfied lovers often use face-saving communication and even humor to express themselves (Miller-Ott & Linder, 2013). That's better than telling pillow-talk lies, which lead to diminished sexual and relational satisfaction (Bennett & Denes, 2019).

It may come as a surprise that not all people in romantic relationships desire sexual activity. There are those whose orientation is "romantic asexual," and coming out for these individuals can be challenging (Robbins et al., 2016). Experts suggest that it's helpful for asexual people to find like-minded others to help them navigate talking about their orientation.

11.3.2 EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The preceding section identified some ways to improve communication in romantic relationships, such as conversing about commitment and displaying affection. Here are two more ways to enhance romantic interaction.

Learning Love Languages

> "If you love me, please listen."
>
> "If you love me, say so."
>
> "If you love me, show me."

The underlying message in statements such as these is, "Here is what love means to me." Author Gary Chapman (2015) contends that each person has a **love language**: a particular notion of what counts as love. He suggests that lovers get into trouble when they fail to recognize that their way of expressing love may not match their partner's.

Chapman identifies five love languages in romantic relationships, and research supports the notion that learning to speak your partner's language can enhance your relationship (Mostova et al., 2022). Although they're not technically "languages," the term is used to suggest that these five categories are different ways to communicate "I love you."

- *Words of affirmation:* These include compliments, words of praise, verbal support, written notes or letters, or other ways of saying that a person is valued and appreciated. People who use this love language are easily hurt by insults or ridicule, or when their efforts aren't verbally acknowledged.
- *Quality time:* This is about being present and available for your partner and giving that person your complete,

undivided attention for a significant period. Being inattentive or distracted takes the "quality" out of time spent together.

- *Gifts:* People who measure love in terms of gifts believe "it's the thought that counts." A gift needn't be expensive to be meaningful; the best ones show that you know the recipient well. To gift-oriented partners, neglecting to honor an important event is a transgression.
- *Acts of service:* Taking out the trash, fueling the car, doing laundry—the list of chores that can be acts of service is endless. Similar to gifts, the key to service is knowing which acts would be most appreciated by your partner. (Hint: It's probably the chore that your partner hates most.)
- *Physical touch:* Although this might include sexual activity, meaningful touch can also include other expressions of affection: an arm around the shoulder, a held hand, a brush of the cheek, or a neck rub.

Watch and Discuss 11.2: "Love Languages"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Which *love language* example offered by Nev and Laura is most familiar to you? Least familiar?

2. Discuss to what degree partners need to merely *accept*, or actually *adopt*, one another's love language.

Partners understandably but mistakenly can assume that the love language they prefer is also the one the other will appreciate. For example, if your primary love language is "gifts," then you probably expect presents from loved ones on special occasions—and perhaps even on ordinary ones. You're also likely to give gifts regularly and assume that they'll be received appreciatively.

As you can imagine, the assumption that your partner speaks the same love language as you can be a setup for disappointment. Chapman (2015) says this is often the case in marriages:

> We tend to speak our primary love language, and we become confused when our spouse does not understand what we are communicating. We are expressing our love, but the message does not come through because we are speaking what, to them, is a foreign language.

Most people learn love languages in their family of origin. The good news is that we can learn to communicate love in different ways, especially with help from our romantic partners. Take a look at the types of love languages in the preceding list and see if you can identify your primary style. You can then ask your partner to do the same and compare notes (see Activity 3 at the end of the chapter). If your love languages are similar, it will probably be easier to meet your partner's needs (Bland & McQueen, 2018). But it's not necessary to have the same love language to communicate effectively (Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017). Rather, the key is adapting your behavior

once you understand how your partner best receives messages as loving. One columnist put it this way:

> … considering the needs and wants of the *other* person first and then adjusting your *own* behavior—and not expecting it to work the other way around—is what makes the whole thing work. (Fetters, 2019)

Fostering Intimacy

Psychologists John and Julie Gottman have been studying romantic relationships for decades. In Section 12.3.3, you'll read about their "Four Horsemen" research in which they identified criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling as corrosive to interpersonal relationships. But they've found that it's not enough to avoid those pitfalls. Healthy romantic relationships require a host of choices and behaviors that foster intimacy (Gottman & Gottman, 2022). These relational tips are simple, but they're steeped in years of social scientific research (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).

The act of *turning toward* is the Gottmans' number one relationship hack. When one partner makes a bid for connection ("Hey, I just listened to a great podcast"), the other partner has three options: turn away (ignore the comment or change the subject), turn against ("Can't you see that I'm busy?"), or turn toward ("Oh—what was it about?"). Turning toward doesn't always require a verbal response—just a nod, touch, or "hmm" can acknowledge your partner's bid. A single act of turning toward won't repair a damaged relationship, but doing "small things often" makes deposits in partners' emotional bank accounts. When those accounts are full, managing conflicts tends to go much more smoothly (Walsh & Neff, 2020).

Here are a few other "small things" that add up over time to foster relational intimacy:

- *Thanks and compliments.* It's easy to take a partner for granted, especially the longer you've been in a relationship. Words of thanks acknowledge what your partner has done; compliments speak to your partner's attributes and character. "Thanks for making coffee for us every morning" or "I appreciate that you left the parking space for me" are about small acts that sometimes go unnoticed. "I love your laugh" or "You are so kind to my family" acknowledge traits that you value. The key is to put your appreciation into words and to express it regularly. Once again, "small things often."
- *Asking big questions.* Sometimes life gets so busy that most of what partners talk about are schedules and chores. You can enrich the relationship by carving out small blocks of time to see how your partner is doing. A question might be serious ("What's your biggest concern about your job right now?") or fun ("What city in the world would you most like to visit?")—but in either case, it offers insight into your partner's thoughts and feelings. (See Activity 4 at the end of the chapter for building your skill at fostering intimacy.)
- *Asking for what you need.* Putting your desires into words (kindly) can keep you happy and avoid harboring resentments: "I need a space here at home where I can work without interruption" or "I'd like more time with you on the weekends." It's easy to imagine that your partner knows what

you want, but that may not be the case until you outright say it.

- *Date nights and touch*. It might be hard to squeeze the kinds of conversations described here into busy days. That's where regular date nights come in. "Dates" don't need to be expensive or elaborate—and they don't even need to be at night. The point is to set aside several hours for just the two of you. Ideally those dates will be filled with laughter, good conversation, and plenty of touch—a vital component of romantic intimacy.

Managing Mediated Communication

As you read in Chapters 2 and 10, it's no longer unusual for romantic relationships to begin online. But even couples who initiate their romance in person need to manage their use of digital communication. Researchers have found that "technoference" can pose serious communication problems (Booth et al., 2021). Technology intrusions on a couple's daily interactions are related to negative moods, increased conflict, and lower relationship quality (McDaniel & Drouin, 2019). Couples are wise to negotiate rules about using (or not using) mobile devices when they're together (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2015) and to keep those devices out of sight when engaging in face-to-face communication (Mirsa et al., 2016).

There's plenty of good news about romantic communication and technology (Taylor & Bazarova, 2018). Communicating via texting, instant messaging, and social media can be an ingredient of relational maintenance (Holtzman et al, 2021; Sharabi & Hopkins, 2021). Younger Americans in particular say that social media play an important role in keeping up with their partners (Vogels & Anderson, 2020). One reason text-based digital channels are so effective is that lovers can craft their messages to convey just the right expression of affection and immediacy (Wells & Dennis, 2016). Although handwritten love letters may be a thing of the past, typed words of affection still make an impact—and most digital messages can be stored and reread. If there's a special text you've saved, an email you've archived, or a social media post you revisit, then you understand the power of written words to maintain a romantic relationship.

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Pornography and Relational Quality

There are a variety of moral and ethical concerns about pornography and its impact on society as a whole. Interpersonal researchers ask a more personal question: "How does pornography affect romantic relationships and marital quality?"

One study (Perry, 2018) analyzed data about married couples' personal habits and relational satisfaction. While pornography had a more profoundly negative impact on religious couples, it lowered relational quality across all marriages. Meta-analyses confirm that regularly viewing pornography reduces interpersonal satisfaction (Wright et al., 2017, 2021), in part by depicting sex as impersonal (Tokunaga et al., 2019).

Other researchers took a closer look at underlying issues (Miller et al., 2019). They found that porn use by men is associated with more frequent masturbation, which in turn affects relational satisfaction. Heavy users regarded porn as a solo spectator sport rather than an intimate way for partners to connect. They also expressed a greater preference for having "porn-like" sex with their partners. Women, on the other hand, often report disdain for such sex (Julian, 2018). It's easy to imagine how this difference could cause serious intimacy challenges for a heterosexual couple.

There are larger concerns about the societal harms of pornography, particularly in its objectification of women (Vandenbosch & VanOosten, 2017). But for individual couples, it

appears that regular consumption of porn carries a host of relational risks.

Mobile devices make it easier than ever to stay in touch with loved ones, and that can enhance personal and interpersonal wellbeing (Taylor & Bazarova, 2021). Is it possible to communicate too much and too often with a romantic partner? Unfortunately, yes. There's a point where constant calls and texts can seem like an invasion of privacy (Ngcongo, 2016), and where sweetness feels like surveillance (McEwan & Horn, 2016). This returns us to a familiar maxim in this book: all things in moderation. When overused and abused, mediated communication can negatively impact a romantic relationship. When employed with care and awareness, these tools can help maintain and strengthen loving partnerships.

A final thought about romantic relationships: They are a means for meeting intimacy needs, but not the *only* means. It's quite possible to have close, affectionate relationships without having a romantic partner (Machin, 2022). Social scientist Bella DePaulo (2006) is an outspoken advocate of singleness. She observes that although American society affords many social and economic benefits to couples, the amount of people identifying as single has more than doubled in recent decades. "Increasing numbers of people are single because they want to be," says DePaulo (2016). "Living single allows them to live their best, most authentic, and most meaningful life."

One study suggests that single people may lead *richer* relational lives. In an analysis of national survey data (Sarkisian & Gerstel,

2016), singles were more likely than marrieds to stay in touch with, provide help to, and receive help from parents, siblings, neighbors, and friends. To return to a theme from this chapter's introduction, it's vital to have close relationships—perhaps as many as five in your innermost circle. But if one of those five isn't a romantic partner, that's not necessarily a problem. In fact, it might free you up to communicate more with your closest friends and family.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 11.1 **Identify the different types of friendship and the role communication plays in maintaining them.**

Several factors determine friendship types, such as length of the relationship; task/maintenance orientation; and degrees of disclosure, obligation, and contact. Sex and gender also affect the way friends communicate. Successful friendships follow a number of guidelines that help avoid expectancy violations.

Q: Use the characteristics in Section 11.1.1 to describe the nature of communication in two of your friendships. How satisfied are you with the quality of communication in each of these friendships? Could you make any changes to improve your satisfaction level?

Objective 11.2 **Describe how communication creates and sustains relationships within families.**

Contemporary families have a variety of traditional and nontraditional arrangements. These arrangements are formed through the communication of narratives, rituals, and rules. Over time, families develop into systems, as members interact with one another to form a whole.

Effective communication in families requires that members establish and maintain a moderate level of cohesion, and they do this by establishing appropriate boundaries. In addition, functional families are adaptable, managing change without too much rigidity or acquiescence. Members of healthy families encourage each other with confirming messages and strive for win-win solutions to their conflicts.

Q: What narratives, rituals, and rules shape communication in your family? What communication patterns characterize your family system? Would any changes in communication patterns and practices lead to a more cohesive, healthy system?

Objective 11.3 **Describe the ways in which love is expressed in romantic relationships.**

Most romantic relationships are typified by three components: love, commitment, and affection. Partners who want to improve their communication can learn each other's love languages, foster intimacy in a variety of ways, and use social media in ways that enhance their relationship.

Q: In a romantic relationship you know well, describe the communication of love, commitment, and affection. Which love languages are most resonant for each person, and how well does each partner communicate in those languages? What kinds of behaviors best foster

intimacy? How does communication—both face-to-face and mediated—shape the quality of the relationship?

ACTIVITIES

1. **Ethical Challenge:** The At Work box in Section 11.1.2 describes the value and challenges of having social media friendships with coworkers. Do you believe it's okay to reject a coworker's friend request? What about blocking someone you work with from seeing your social media feeds and posts? How would you respond if a coworker asked why they were rejected or blocked?
2. **Reflection**: Review Section 11.2.1, then see if you can identify several *narratives*, *rituals,* and *rules* from your family of origin. What do these features say about how your family operated? Which might you continue—or not continue—in future family configurations?
3. **Self-Appraisal**: Rank the five love languages below (described in Section 11.3.2) from most to least in terms of how well each communicates love to you in a romantic relationship:
    a. Words of affirmation
    b. Quality time
    c. Gifts
    d. Acts of service
    e. Physical touch

If you're currently in a romantic relationship, ask your partner to guess your rankings—then switch roles and do the same for your partner. How close were your guesses? What did you learn? If you're not currently in a romantic relationship, have a close friend or family member guess your rankings and discuss.

4. **Build Your Skill:** The tips for fostering intimacy (Section 11.3.2) can improve communication in any close relationship. During this week, offer each of the following to a romantic partner, a close friend, or a valued family member:
    a. A word of thanks—express appreciation for something that person has done.
    b. A compliment—acknowledge a character trait that you value in that person.
    c. A big question—inquire about that person's thoughts, feelings, goals, challenges, dreams, etc.

    Evaluate how skillfully you performed each option. How did the person respond? Do you think it enhanced your relationship?

Assessing Your Communication: Your Family's Communication Pattern (Personal Practice)

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

LIST OF KEY TERMS

boundaries

Conformity orientation

Conversation orientation

expectancy violations

family

family communication pattern

friendship

love language

Narratives

Relational commitment

systems

triangular theory of love

CHAPTER 11 Flashcards

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

12
Managing Conflict

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **12.1** **Describe the nature of conflict and its attributes.**
- **12.2** **Explain five styles of handling conflict and how they are communicated.**
- **12.3** **Recognize various communication patterns in relational conflicts.**

12.4 Explain how the conflict management process can ideally resolve interpersonal conflicts.

Once upon a time, there was a world without conflicts. The leaders of each nation recognized the need for cooperation and met regularly to solve any potential problems. They never disagreed on matters needing attention or on ways to handle these matters, and so there were never any international tensions, and of course there was no war.

Within each nation things ran just as smoothly. The citizens always agreed on who their leaders should be, so elections were always unanimous. There was no social friction among various groups. Age, race, and educational differences did exist, but each group respected the others, and all got along harmoniously.

Human relationships were always perfect. Strangers were always kind and friendly to each other. Neighbors were considerate of each other's needs. Friendships were always mutual, and no disagreements ever spoiled people's enjoyment of one another. Once people fell in love—and everyone did—they stayed happy. Partners liked everything about each other and

> *were able to fully satisfy each other's needs. Children and parents agreed on every aspect of family life and never were critical or hostile toward each other. Each day was better than the one before.*
>
> *Of course, everybody lived happily ever after.*

THIS STORY IS OBVIOUSLY a fairy tale. Regardless of what we may wish for or dream about, a conflict-free world just doesn't exist. Even the best communicators, the luckiest people, are bound to wind up in situations where their needs don't match the needs of others. Money, time, power, sex, humor, aesthetic taste, and a thousand other issues arise and keep us from living in a state of perpetual agreement.

For many people, the inevitability of conflict is a depressing fact. They think the existence of ongoing conflict means there's little chance for happy relationships. Effective communicators know differently. They realize that although it's impossible to *eliminate* conflict, there are ways to *manage* it effectively. The skillful management of conflict can open the door to healthier, stronger, and more satisfying relationships, as well as to increased mental and physical health (Adamo et al., 2021).

12.1 What Is Conflict?

Stop reading for a moment and make a list of conflicts you've experienced personally. The list will probably show you that conflict takes many forms. Sometimes there's angry shouting, as when parents yell at their children, or vice versa. In other cases, conflicts involve restrained discussion, as in labor–management negotiations or court trials. Sometimes conflicts are expressed through hostile silence, as in the unspoken feuds of angry couples. Finally, conflicts may wind up in physical fighting between friends, enemies, or even total strangers.

Whatever forms they may take, all interpersonal conflicts share certain features. William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker (2014) define **conflict** as an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals. The various parts of this definition can help you gain a better understanding of how conflict operates in everyday life.

When the health of the Roy family patriarch begins to decline in the TV series *Succession*, conflict ensues among the siblings as they compete for control of his media conglomerate. While the resources they struggle over aren't scarce (unless you count vying for their father's attention), they're locked in an interdependent battle with incompatible goals. *Describe the sources and styles of conflict in your family*. View larger image

12.1.1 Expressed Struggle

The definition of conflict requires that all the people involved know that some disagreement exists. You may be upset for months because a neighbor's loud music keeps you awake at night, but no conflict exists until the neighbor learns about your problem. An expressed struggle doesn't have to be verbal. An angry look, the silent treatment, and avoiding the other person are all ways of expressing yourself. One way or another, both people must know that a problem exists before it fits our definition of conflict.

12.1.2 Interdependence

However antagonistic they might feel, the people in a conflict are connected. The welfare and satisfaction of one depends on the actions of the other(s) (Johnson & Cionea, 2017).

Many conflicts remain unresolved because the people involved fail to understand, accept, and acknowledge their interdependence. You might find a roommate, neighbor, or coworker annoying. But unless you can sever your ties, you need to work out a way to coexist. One of the first steps toward resolving a conflict is to take the attitude that "we're in this together."

12.1.3 Perceived Incompatible Goals

All conflicts look as if one person's gain would be another's loss. For instance, consider a neighbor whose music keeps you awake at night. It appears that someone has to lose: Either the neighbor loses the enjoyment of hearing the music at full volume, or else you are still awake and unhappy.

The goals in this situation really aren't completely incompatible—solutions do exist that allow you both to get what you want. For instance, you could achieve peace and quiet by closing your windows or getting the neighbor to close hers. You might use earplugs, or

perhaps the neighbor could use earphones. If any of these solutions proves workable, then the conflict disappears.

Unfortunately, people often fail to see mutually satisfying answers to their problems. As long as they *perceive* their goals to be mutually exclusive, the conflict is real, albeit unnecessary.

12.1.4 Perceived Scarce Resources

Conflicts also exist when people believe there isn't enough of something to go around: affection, money, space, and so on. Time is often a scarce commodity. Many people struggle to meet the competing demands of school, work, family, and friends. "If there were only more hours in a day" is a common refrain, and making time for the people in your life—and for yourself—is a constant source of conflict.

12.1.5 Inevitability

Conflicts are bound to happen, even in the best relationships. Common sources of conflict among college roommates include access to each other's personal items and food, how clean/messy the rooms are, who can use what furniture, and how involved they should be in each other's personal lives (Ocana & Hindman, 2004). Conflicts with friends also are typical, with an average of one or two disagreements a day (Burk et al., 2009). Among families, conflict can

be even more frequent, whether the topic is money, being on time, who does what chores, how to handle relatives, or how to balance work and family obligations (Obrenovic et al., 2020).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

The Dangers of Mind-Reading Expectations

Some communicators approach conflicts with mindreading expectations, assuming their partners will know why they're upset, even if they haven't explained themselves.

Courtney Wright and Michael Roloff wanted to learn the effects of mind-reading expectations on college students in dating relationships. The researchers used a survey that included items such as "People who love each other know each other's thoughts without a word being said." The participants also responded to questions about emotional reactions, conflict styles, and relational satisfaction.

Not surprisingly, subjects with mind-reading expectations were more likely to become upset with their partners than were those without such expectations. The angrier they became, the more likely they were to use the silent treatment to punish their partners. Their assumption seemed to be "You should know why I'm upset—and if you don't, I'm not going to tell you." The researchers noted that mind-reading expectations and the silent treatment typically led to "problematic relational dynamics."

Talking out problems won't always resolve conflicts. But in general, it's better to constructively explain why you're upset than to assume others can read your mind.

Wright, C. N., & Roloff, M. E. (2015). You should *just know* why I'm upset: Expectancy violation theory and the influence of mind reading expectations (MRE) on responses to relational problems. *Communication Research Reports, 32*, 10–19.

Because it is impossible to avoid conflicts, the challenge is to handle them effectively when they do arise. Decades of research show that people in both happy and unhappy relationships have conflicts, but that they perceive them and manage them in very different ways (Wilmot & Hocker, 2014). Unhappy couples argue in ways we catalog as destructive. They approach conflicts expecting them to end poorly (Aloia, 2018). They are more concerned with defending themselves than with solving problems. They have little or no empathy for each other, fail to listen carefully, ignore each other's relational messages, and use evaluative "you" language (Timmons, et al., 2021). These destructive conflict patterns can result in poor mental and physical health for the parties involved (Segrin & Flora, 2017).

Many satisfied couples handle their conflicts more effectively. They recognize disagreements as healthy and know that conflicts need to be faced (Overall & McNulty, 2017). Although they may argue vigorously, they use skills such as perception checking to find out what the other person is thinking. They let the other person know they understand the other side of the dispute. These people are willing to admit their mistakes, a habit that contributes to a harmonious relationship and also helps solve the problem at hand. With this in mind, we take a closer look at what makes some conflicts more constructive than others. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for a reflection on your interpersonal conflict components.)

12.2 Conflict Styles

Most people have default styles of handling conflict—characteristic approaches they take when their needs appear incompatible with what others want. Although our habitual styles work in some situations, they may not work at all in others. What styles do you typically use to deal with conflict? To find out, take a moment to complete the "Assessing Your Communication" quiz at the end of this chapter. Then consider this hypothetical situation.

Cam and Lee have been roommates for several years. Cam is a soccer fan and loves watching games with his friends at every opportunity. Their apartment has a big-screen TV (owned by Cam) in the living room, and it has become a regular gathering spot for viewing. Lee doesn't mind watching an occasional game, but he's annoyed by what seems like endless TV (and endless houseguests). Cam thinks he ought to be able to watch his TV whenever he wants, with whomever he wants. Here are five ways they could handle their conflict, representing five different conflict styles:

- *Avoidance*. Cam and Lee don't discuss the issue again—the prospect of fighting is too unpleasant. Cam has tried to cut back on watching games with friends but feels cheated. Lee keeps quiet, but when game time rolls around, his feelings of displeasure are obvious.
- *Accommodation*. Lee gives in, saying, "Go ahead and watch all the soccer you want. After all, it's your TV. I'll just go in the bedroom and listen to music." Alternatively, Cam could accommodate by agreeing not to watch soccer at home.
- *Competition*. Cam tries to persuade Lee that watching more soccer will lead to a better understanding of the game, and that Lee will want to watch it more as a result. Lee tries to convince Cam that spending so much time

watching TV isn't healthy. Both try to get the other person to give up and give in.

- *Compromise*. The roommates agree to split the difference. Cam gets to watch any and every game at home as long as the friends don't come over. Cam gets soccer; Lee gets relative peace and quiet. Of course, Cam misses his friends, and Lee must still endure hours of Cam's TV viewing.
- *Collaboration*. Cam and Lee brainstorm and discover other alternatives. For example, they decide that the fans could watch some games together at a sports bar. They also realize that if each of Cam's friends could pitch in a modest sum, one of the friends could also buy a large-screen TV for home, where they could watch some games (and avoid the sports bar costs). Lee also suggests that he and Cam could watch some non-sports TV together.

These approaches represent the five styles depicted in Figure 12.1, each of which is described in the following subsections.

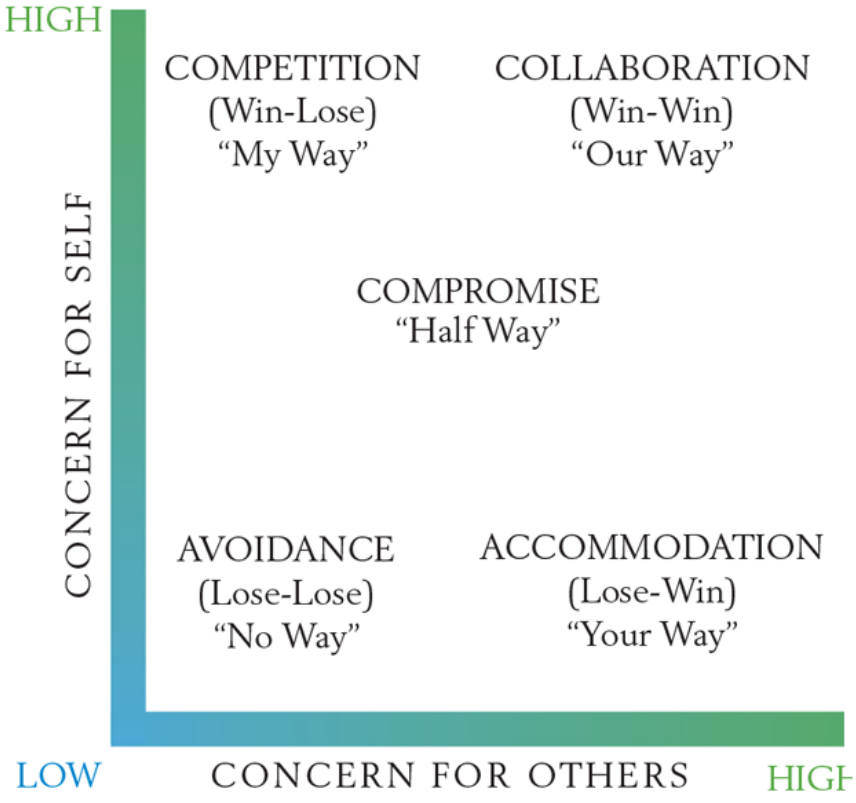


FIGURE 12.1 Conflict Styles View larger image

12.2.1 Avoidance (Lose-Lose)

Avoidance occurs when people choose not to confront an issue directly. It can be physical (steering clear of a friend after having an argument) or conversational (changing the topic, joking, or denying that a problem exists).

Avoidance generally reflects a pessimistic attitude about conflict. Avoiders usually believe it's easier to put up with the status quo than to face the problem head-on and try to solve it. In the case of Cam and Lee, avoidance means that rather than having another fight, both of them will suffer in silence. Their case illustrates how avoidance often produces lose-lose results.

Although avoiding important issues can keep the peace temporarily, it typically leads to unsatisfying relationships (Bretaña et al., 2020). Partners of "self-silencers" report more frustration and discomfort when dealing with the avoiding partner than with those who face conflict more constructively (Harper & Welsh, 2007). And when avoiders don't voice their complaints, their partners' irritating behaviors may increase, which in turn increases their emotional distress (Liu & Roloff, 2016). Chronic misunderstandings, resentments, and disappointments pile up and contaminate the emotional climate. For this reason, we can say that avoiders have a low concern both for their own needs and for the interests of the other person, who is also likely to suffer from unaddressed issues (see Figure 12.1).

Despite its obvious shortcomings, avoidance isn't always a bad idea (Hample & Hample, 2020). You might choose to avoid certain topics or situations if the risk of speaking up is too great, such as getting fired from a job you can't afford to lose, being humiliated in public, or even suffering physical harm. You might also avoid a conflict if the relationship it involves isn't worth the effort. Even in close relationships, though, avoidance has its logic. If the issue is temporary or minor, you might let it pass. These reasons help explain why the communication of many happily married couples is characterized by "selectively ignoring" the other person's minor flaws (Segrin et al., 2009). This doesn't mean that a key to successful relationships is avoiding *all* conflicts. Instead, it suggests that it's smart to save energy for the truly important ones (Rauer et al., 2019).

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Ghosting: The Ultimate Silent Treatment

No text responses. No email replies. No phone calls returned. Blocked on social media. You thought you were close to this person, but communication has been suddenly severed. You've been ghosted.

Ghosting occurs "when one person suddenly ignores or stops communicating with another person, without telling them why" (Kay & Courtice, 2022). Although it typically occurs in romantic relationships, ghosting happens in friendships, too (Pearson, 2023). A 2019 YouGovAmerica survey found that 30 percent of people had ghosted a romantic partner or friend.

In terms of conflict styles, ghosting can be an act of passive aggression or simple avoidance. Either way, being summarily rejected can leave scars. Here's how one jilted lover described the wake of being ghosted (Wesley, 2016):

> When you leave without saying a word and without giving us a reason, all we have are more questions. We question ourselves, we question who you really were, and we question our futures. Without being given proper closure, we become more afraid of the next romantic encounter.

It's not always wrong to ghost someone. For example, if you're walking out on an abusive relationship, there's good reason to leave without a trace (Timmermans et al., 2021). However, when you're ending a nonthreatening romance or friendship, it's usually best to say goodbye—or at least say something. In most cases, your relational partner deserves that respect. And if you've been ghosted, experts suggest moving on and making new connections rather than seeking explanations that may never be forthcoming (Wollan, 2022). (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for an ethical challenge about ghosting.)

12.2.2 Accommodation (Lose-Win)

Accommodation occurs when you entirely give in to others rather than asserting your own point of view. Figure 12.1 depicts accommodators as having low concern for themselves and high concern for others, resulting in lose-win, "we'll do it your way" outcomes.

The motivation of an accommodator plays a significant role in this style's effectiveness. If accommodation is a genuine act of kindness, generosity, or love that involves self-sacrifice, then chances are good that it will enhance the relationship (Peetz et al., 2021). Most people appreciate those who "take one for the team," "treat others as they want to be treated," or "lose the battle to win the war." However, people are far less appreciative of those who habitually use this style to play the role of "martyr, bitter complainer, whiner, or saboteur" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2014).

We should pause here to mention the important role that culture plays in perceptions of conflict styles. People from high-context, collectivistic backgrounds (such as many Asian cultures) are likely to regard avoidance and accommodation as face-saving and noble ways to handle conflict (Stadler, 2019). In low-context, individualistic cultures (such as that of the United States), avoidance and accommodation are often viewed less positively. For instance, think of the many unflattering terms that Americans use for people who give up or give in during conflicts ("pushover," "weakling," "doormat," "spineless"). Collectivistic cultures view these behaviors much more favorably. The point here is that all conflict styles have merit in certain situations, and culture plays a significant role in determining how each style is valued.

"It's not enough that we succeed. Cats must also fail."

12.2.3 Competition (Win-Lose)

The flip side of accommodation is **competition**, a win-lose approach to conflict that involves high concern for self and low concern for others. As Figure 12.1 shows, competition seeks to resolve conflicts "my way."

Competition can sometimes enhance a relationship. One study looked at people in dating relationships who used competition to enrich their interaction (Messman & Mikesell, 2000). For example, some found satisfaction by competing in play (who's the better racquetball or Scrabble player?), in achievement (who gets the better job offer or the higher grade?), and in altruism (who's more romantic or does the most charity work?). The same can occur between friends and coworkers, where competition can bring out the best in both parties (Zou & Ingram, 2013). Of course, these arrangements could backfire if one partner became a gloating winner or a sore loser. In addition, rivalries can sometimes escalate out of control, with destructive outcomes (Piezunka et al., 2018).

The dark side of competition is that it often breeds aggression (Adachi & Willoughby, 2016). Sometimes aggression is obvious, but at other times it can be subtler. To understand how, read on.

Passive Aggression

Passive aggression occurs when a communicator expresses dissatisfaction in a disguised manner (Kluger, 2017). In our hypothetical conflict between Lee and Cam, perhaps Lee runs the vacuum cleaner loudly during the soccer matches—or Cam makes sarcastic jokes about Lee not liking sports. Passive aggression can take the form of "crazymaking" (Key, 2014)—tactics designed to punish another person without direct confrontation. Crazymaking takes its name from the effect such behavior usually has on its target.

Dealing with conflict this way includes a number of approaches. One is guilt: "Never mind. I'll do all the work myself [sigh]. Go ahead and have a good time. Don't worry about me [sigh]." Another tactic is agreeing with someone while harboring a different agenda, such as teenagers who say they'll clean their room and then don't to get back at the parent who grounded them. Some passive aggression is nonverbal: a roll of the eyes, a pained expression, or a disdainful laugh can get a message across. If the target of these messages asks about them, the passive aggressor can always deny the conflict exists. Even humor—especially sarcasm ("Gee, I can't *wait* to spend the weekend with your folks")—can be passive aggressive (Bowes & Katz, 2011). And sometimes saying nothing is a crazymaker weapon. No one likes getting "the silent treatment," and it usually damages interpersonal relationships (Rittenour et al., 2019).

Watch and Discuss 12.1: "Signs You're the Passive Aggressive Friend"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. What verbal and nonverbal forms of passive aggression can you spot?
2. Which people in your life (including yourself) regularly use passive aggression in conflict situations? What are some examples?

Direct Aggression

Communicators who engage in **direct aggression** attack the position and dignity of the receiver. Communication scholars list a variety of behaviors that can typify direct aggression: attacks on competence or character, swearing, teasing, ridicule, nonverbal emblems (e.g., "the finger"), and threats (Rancer & Avtgis, 2014). In the case of Lee and Cam, the conflict might turn into an ugly shouting match, with denigrating comments about how only a fool would or wouldn't like sports, watching TV, or having friends over.

Chapter 13 has more to say about the traits and consequences of aggressive communication. For now, it's worth pointing out that a win-lose conflict style can have a high relational cost—especially when the loser is a close friend or loved one. Your victory might be a hollow one if the other party is glum, hurt, or angry about the conflict's outcome. To paraphrase a familiar saying, you may win the relational battle but lose the war.

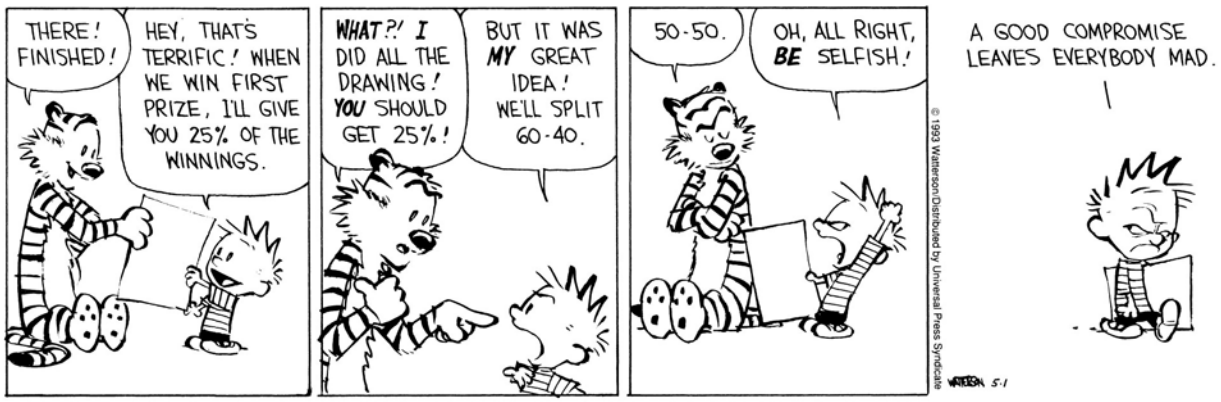
12.2.4 Compromise

A **compromise** gives both people at least some of what they want, although both sacrifice part of their goals. People usually settle for a compromise when it seems that partial satisfaction is the best they can hope for.

Although a compromise may be better than losing everything, this approach hardly seems to deserve its positive image. Professional negotiator Chris Voss (2016) notes that compromise is often promoted as "a sacred moral good," but it typically satisfies neither side. That's why he recommends to "never split the difference"

because doing so usually leads to lose-lose outcomes. Although compromise may be the best obtainable result in some conflicts, partners in a dispute can often work together to find much better solutions (Jandt, 2017).

Most of us are surrounded by the results of bad compromises. Consider a common example: the conflict between one person's desire to smoke cigarettes and another's need for clean air. The win-lose outcomes on this issue are obvious: Either the smoker abstains or the nonsmoker gets polluted lungs—neither option a very satisfying one. But a compromise in which the smoker gets to enjoy only a rare cigarette or must retreat outdoors and in which the nonsmoker still must inhale some fumes or feel unaccommodating is hardly better. Both sides have lost a considerable amount of both comfort and goodwill. Of course, the costs involved in other compromises are even greater. For example, if a divorced couple's custody battle leaves them bitter and emotionally scars their children, it's hard to say that anybody has won no matter what the outcome.


THERE! FINISHED!
HEY, THAT'S TERRIFIC! WHEN WE WIN FIRST PRIZE, I'LL GIVE YOU 25% OF THE WINNINGS.
WHAT?! I DID ALL THE DRAWING! YOU SHOULD GET 25%!
BUT IT WAS MY GREAT IDEA! WE'LL SPLIT 60-40.
50-50.
OH, ALL RIGHT, BE SELFISH!
A GOOD COMPROMISE LEAVES EVERYBODY MAD.
© 1993 Watterson/Distributed by Universal Press Syndicate

Some compromises do leave everyone satisfied. You and the seller of a used car might settle on a price that is between what the seller was asking and what you wanted to pay. Although neither of you got everything you wanted, the outcome would still leave you both satisfied. Likewise, you and your companion might agree to see a movie that is the second choice for both of you. As long as everyone is at least somewhat satisfied with an outcome, compromise can be an effective way to resolve conflicts. When compromises are satisfying and successful, it might be more accurate to categorize them as the final style we discuss: collaboration.

12.2.5 Collaboration (Win-Win)

Collaboration seeks win-win solutions to conflict. It involves a high degree of concern for both self and others, with the goal of solving problems not "my way" or "your way" but "our way." In the best case, collaborating can lead to a *win-win* outcome, where each person succeeds (Shonk, 2019).

In **win-win problem solving**, the goal is to find a solution that satisfies the needs of everyone involved. Not only do the partners avoid trying to succeed at each other's expense, but there's also a belief that working together can provide a solution in which all reach their goals without needing to compromise.

Collaborating has benefits beyond the problem at hand. When people want to achieve a win-win resolution to an argument, they're more likely to actively listen to their partners. That approach leads to less aggressive communication and ultimately less stress for everyone (Liu & Roloff, 2015).

A few examples show how collaboration can lead to win-win outcomes:

- Employees and their boss get into a conflict over scheduling. The employees often want to shift their scheduled work hours to accommodate personal needs, whereas the boss needs to ensure full staffing at all times. After some discussion they arrive at a solution that satisfies everyone: Employees are free to trade hours among themselves, as long as the store remains fully staffed.
- A conflict about testing arises in a college class. Due to sickness and other reasons, some students need to take a make-up exam. The instructor doesn't want to give these students any advantage over their peers or create a new exam. After working on the problem together, the instructor and students arrive at a win-win solution. The instructor will hand out a list of 20 possible exam questions in advance. At examination time, 5 of these questions will be randomly drawn for the class to answer. Students who take a make-up exam will draw from the same pool of questions.

- A newly married couple find themselves arguing frequently over their budget. One partner enjoys buying impractical items, while the other fears that such purchases will ruin their carefully constructed budget. Their solution is to set aside a small amount of money each month for "fun" purchases. The amount is small enough to be affordable while allowing for occasional splurges. The more conservative spouse is satisfied with the arrangement because the fun money is now a budget category.

Although such solutions might seem obvious when you read them here, a moment's reflection will show you that such cooperative problem solving is all too rare. People faced with these types of conflicts often resort to avoiding, accommodating, or competing, and they wind up handling the issues in a manner that results in either a win-lose or lose-lose outcome. As we pointed out earlier, it's a shame to see one or both partners in a conflict come away unsatisfied when they could both get what they're seeking by collaborating. Later in this chapter, you'll learn a specific process for arriving at collaborative solutions to problems.

Of course, a win-win approach is not always possible or even always appropriate. Collaborative problem solving can be quite time-consuming, and some conflict decisions need to be made quickly. Moreover, many conflicts are about relatively minor issues that don't call for a great deal of creativity and brainstorming. As you'll see in the following section, there certainly will be times when compromising is the most sensible approach. You will even encounter instances when pushing for your own solution is reasonable. Even more surprisingly, you will probably discover there are times when it makes sense to willingly accept the loser's role. Much of the time, however, good intentions and creative thinking can lead to outcomes that satisfy everyone's needs.

12.2.6 Which Style to Use?

Although collaborative problem solving might seem like the most attractive style, it's an oversimplification to imagine that there is a single best way to respond to conflicts (Gross & Guerrero, 2000). Generally speaking, win-win approaches are preferable to win-lose and lose-lose solutions. But we've already seen that there are

times when avoidance, accommodation, competition, and compromise are appropriate. Table 12.1 suggests situations when it may be best to use a particular style.

TABLE 12.1 When to Use Each Conflict Style

Factor	Avoidance (Lose-Lose)	Accommodation (Lose-Win)	Competition (Win-Lose)	Compromise	Collaboration (Win-Win)
The issue's Importance	When the issue is of little importance	When the issue is more important to the other person than to you	When the issue is not important enough to negotiate at length	When the issue is moderately important but not enough for a stalemate	When the issue is too important for a compromise
Point of view	To cool down and gain perspective	When you discover you are wrong	When you are convinced that your position is right and necessary	When both sides are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals	When you can merge insights with someone who has a different perspective on the problem
Time	When the issue isn't worth a lot of time and effort	When the long-term cost of winning may not be worth the short-term gain	When there is not enough time to seek a win-win outcome	To achieve quick, temporary solutions to complex problems	When you are willing to invest the necessary time and energy
Relational consideration	When the costs of confrontation outweigh the benefits	To build up credits for later conflicts	When the other person is not willing to seek a win-win outcome	When you jeopardize nothing important on either side	When the long-term relationship is important
Rationale	To stay away from either unnecessary risk and/or unnecessary involvement	When the issue isn't important or the costs of challenging the other are too high	To protect yourself against an unacceptable threat	As a backup mode when collaboration doesn't work	To come up with creative solutions

Adapted from Wilmot, W. W., & Hocker, J. L. (2014). *Interpersonal conflict* (9th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

A conflict style isn't necessarily a personality trait that carries across all situations. Wilmot and Hocker (2014) suggest that roughly 50 percent of the population change their style from one situation to another. As you learned in Chapter 1, this sort of behavioral flexibility is a characteristic of competent communicators. Several factors govern which style to use, including the situation, the other person, and your goals.

The Situation

When someone clearly has more power than you, accommodation may be the best approach. If the boss tells you to "fill that order *now!*" you probably ought to do it without comment. A more competitive response ("Why don't you ask someone with less work than I to do it?") might state your true feelings, but it could also cost you your job. Beyond power, other situational factors can shape your communication in a conflict. For example, you would probably try to set aside personal disagreements with siblings or parents when it's necessary to support one another during a family crisis.

The Other Person

Although win-win is a fine ideal, sometimes the other person isn't interested in (or good at) collaborating. You probably know communicators who are so competitive that even for minor issues, they put winning ahead of the well-being of your relationship. In such cases, your efforts to collaborate may have a low chance of success.

Your Goals

When you want to solve a problem, it's generally good to be assertive (see Chapter 6 for information on creating assertive "I" messages). But there are other reasons

for communicating in a conflict. Sometimes your overriding concern is to calm down an enraged or upset communicator. For example, company policy or self-preservation might lead you to keep quiet in the face of a customer's rant or a boss's unfair criticism. Likewise, you might choose to sit quietly through the nagging of a family member at Thanksgiving dinner rather than make a scene. In other cases, your moral principles might compel an aggressive statement, even though it might not get you what you originally sought: "I've had enough of your crude and nasty jokes. I've tried to explain why they're so offensive, but I don't think you have listened. I'm leaving!" (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter for a self-appraisal of your use of conflict styles.)

12.3 Conflict in Relational Systems

Your approach isn't the only factor that will determine how the situation unfolds. Conflict happens within *relational systems*, and its character is usually determined by the way all the people involved interact (Hample & Richards, 2019). For example, you might expect to handle a conflict with your neighbors collaboratively, only to be driven to competition by their uncooperative nature or even to avoidance by their physical threats. Likewise, you might plan to avoid talking with a professor about your discomfort with the class format but wind up collaboratively discussing the matter in response to your instructor's constructive suggestions. Examples like these demonstrate that conflict isn't just a matter of individual choice. Rather, it depends on relational interactions.

12.3.1 Complementary and Symmetrical Conflict

The conflict approaches of partners in interpersonal relationships—and impersonal ones, too—can be complementary or symmetrical. In **complementary conflict**, the partners use different but mutually reinforcing behaviors. As Table 12.2 illustrates, some complementary

conflicts are destructive, whereas others are constructive. In **symmetrical conflict**, both people use the same tactics. Table 12.2 shows how the same conflict can unfold in very different ways, depending on whether the partners' communication is symmetrical or complementary.

TABLE 12.2 Complementary and Symmetrical Conflict Outcomes

Situation	Complementary Conflict	Symmetrical Conflict
	Destructive:	**Constructive:**
One partner is upset because the other is spending little time at home.	One partner makes demands; the other withdraws, spending even less time at home.	One partner raises concern clearly and assertively, without aggression. The other responds by explaining concerns in the same manner.
	Constructive:	**Destructive:**
Boss makes fun of employee in front of other workers.	Employee seeks out boss for private conversation, explaining why the joking was embarrassing. Boss listens willingly.	Employee maliciously jokes about boss at company party. Boss continues to make fun of employee.
	Destructive:	**Constructive:**
Parents are uncomfortable about teenager's new friends.	Parents express concerns. Teen dismisses them, saying "There's nothing to worry about."	Teen expresses concern that parents are being too protective. Parents and teen negotiate a mutually agreeable solution.

A complementary "fight–flight" approach is common in many unhappy marriages. One partner addresses the conflict directly, whereas the other withdraws (Knight & Alberts, 2018). This is more likely to occur in relationships where power is not shared equally (Dunbar & Gordon, 2021). As Chapter 5 explained, this pattern can lead to a cycle of increasing hostility and isolation because each partner punctuates the conflict differently, blaming the other for making matters worse. "I withdraw because you're so critical," one partner might say. However, the other wouldn't sequence it the same way: "I criticize because you withdraw." Couples who use demand–withdraw patterns report being less than satisfied with their conflict discussions and that their negotiations rarely produce change (McGinn et al., 2009).

The same fight–flight pattern also shows up in conflicts between parents and teenagers, most commonly when they tangle over issues like chores, cleanliness, and curfews. Families who fall into a demand–withdraw pattern are likely to feel stressed and unhappy about their relationships. They even have a greater likelihood of falling ill than families who handle disagreements more constructively (Reznik et al., 2015).

Complementary approaches aren't the only ones that can lead to problems. Some distressed relationships suffer from destructively symmetrical communication (Weingart et al., 2015). If both partners treat each other with matching hostility, one threat and insult leads to another in an **escalatory spiral**. If the partners both withdraw from each other instead of facing their problems, a problematic **de-**

escalatory spiral results: the hostility decreases, but the satisfaction and vitality ebb from the relationship.

As Table 12.2 shows, however, both complementary and symmetrical behaviors can also be constructive. If the complementary behaviors are positive, then a positive spiral results, and the conflict stands a good chance of being resolved. This is the case in the second example in Table 12.2, when the boss is open to hearing the employee's concerns. Here, a complementary talk–listen pattern works well.

Constructive symmetry occurs when both people communicate assertively, listening to one another's concerns and working together to resolve them. Married couples who take this approach appraise their marriages more positively than any other type of couple does (Hanzal & Segrin, 2009). The parent–teenager conflict in Table 12.2 has the potential for this sort of solution. With enough mutual respect and careful listening, both the parents and their teenager can understand one another's concerns and possibly find a way to give all three people what they want.

As portrayed in the musical *Hamilton*, the long-running feud between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton turned into a lethal escalatory spiral. ***What tactics can you use to keep an interpersonal conflict from raging out of control?*** View larger image

12.3.2 Serial Arguments

In a perfect world, we could work through each relational conflict and move on, satisfied that the matter was resolved. But in real life, some issues keep recurring. Like weeds in a garden, they become a perennial problem that requires constant attention.

Serial arguments are repetitive conflicts about the same issue (Morrison & Schrodt, 2017). They can focus on topics ranging from

the seemingly mundane (e.g., managing household chores) to the extremely serious (e.g., substance use, infidelity).

One study looked at causes of serial arguments in romantic relationships (Bevan et al., 2014). One of the most common involves *problematic behaviors*—habits such as chronic overspending (or tight budgeting) and sloppiness (or hyper-neatness).

Another source of ongoing friction is *personality characteristics*, such as introversion and extroversion. If you're an extrovert who craves social interaction, and your partner is an introvert who cherishes solitude (or vice versa), challenges are likely. Some serial arguments stem from only one partner's personality: a perpetual pessimist or a constant critic, for example. Changing deeply ingrained ways of thinking and acting isn't impossible, but it's difficult.

Another common issue in serial arguments involves *communication styles and practices*, or the typical ways in which partners communicate. For example, if you typically avoid confrontation while your partner is routinely assertive, that's likely to cause continual friction. Likewise, chronic disputes will probably occur if you prefer candor while your partner is more diplomatic.

Regardless of the topic, unresolved serial arguments can be emotionally loaded. Frustration with recurring problems can lead to the kinds of rumination described in Chapter 9, adding fuel to the emotional fire and making future arguments more intense (Bevan et al., 2017). It's not surprising, then, that serial arguments are more likely than nonrecurring ones to use hostile communication. Angry

exclamations such as “We’ve been down this road a dozen times!” or “I can’t believe we’re fighting about this again!” are typical of serial arguing and express a sense of despair.

Despite this discouraging picture, the results can be positive when both partners are equally involved and willing to talk about the chronic issue (Johnson & Cionea, 2017). Optimism about resolving the conflict can also help (Vanderbilt & Solomon, 2021). The problem-solving method described at the end of this chapter might not make serial arguments go away, but it can offer steps in the right direction.

12.3.3 Toxic Conflict: The “Four Horsemen”

Some conflict approaches are so destructive that they are almost guaranteed to wreak havoc on relationships. These toxic forms of communication include what John Gottman has called the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” (Gottman, 1994; see also Horan et al., 2015).

Watch and Discuss 12.2: “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Which of the *Four Horsemen* are you guilty of using? Which do others use on you? How does engaging in these communication styles affect your relationships?
2. Discuss how the antidotes offered in this video are similar to prescriptions from this and other chapters in this book.

Gottman has gathered decades of data about newlywed couples and their communication patterns. By observing their interactions, he has been able to predict with high accuracy whether the newlyweds will end up divorcing. Here are the four destructive signs he looks for:

1. **Criticism**: These are attacks on a person's character. As you read in Chapter 6, there's a significant difference between legitimate complaints phrased in descriptive "I" language ("I wish you had been on time—we're going to be late to the movie") and critical character assaults stated as evaluative "you" messages ("You're so thoughtless—you never think of anyone but yourself").
2. **Defensiveness**: As you'll read in Chapter 13, defensiveness is a reaction that aims to protect one's presenting self by denying responsibility ("You're wrong—I never do that") and counterattacking ("You're worse about that than I am"). Although some self-protection is understandable, problems

arise when a person refuses to listen to or even acknowledge another's concerns.

3. **Contempt**: A contemptuous comment belittles and demeans. It can take the form of name-calling putdowns ("You're a real jerk") or sarcastic barbs ("Oh, *that* was brilliant"). Contempt can also be communicated nonverbally through dramatic eye rolls or disgusted sighs. (Try doing both of those at the same time and imagine how dismissive they can be.)
4. **Stonewalling**: Stonewalling occurs when one person in a relationship withdraws from the interaction, shutting down dialogue—and any chance of resolving the problem in a mutually satisfactory way. It sends a disconfirming "you don't matter" message to the other person.

Here's a brief exchange illustrating how the "four horsemen" can lead to a destructive spiral of aggression:

> "You overdrew our account again—can't you do *anything* right?" (Criticism)
>
> "Hey, don't blame me—you're the one who spends most of the money." (Defensiveness)
>
> "At least I have better math skills than a first-grader. Way to go, Einstein." (Contempt)
>
> "Whatever" (said while walking out of the room). (Stonewalling)

Engaging in this kind of communication not only jeopardizes relationships but it takes a physical toll (Haase et al., 2016). Critical, contemptuous communicators have an increased risk of cardiovascular problems such as high blood pressure and chest pain. Stonewallers tend to experience backaches and stiff muscles. In other words, it's not healthy to either "blow up" or "bottle up." Instead, communicators in conflict need to express their emotions in healthy, productive ways, as outlined in this chapter and the next.

Toxic conflict can be destructive in any interpersonal relationship. Criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling feed off one another and can develop into destructive conflict rituals, as we see next. (See Activity 4 for a skill builder about avoiding toxic conflict communication.)

12.3.4 Conflict Rituals

When people have been in a relationship for some time, their communication often develops into **conflict rituals**—unacknowledged but very real repeating patterns of interlocking behavior (Wilmot & Hocker, 2014). Consider a few common rituals:

- Young children interrupt their parents, demanding to be included in their conversation. At first the parents tell the children to wait, but they whine and cry until the parents find it easier to listen than to ignore the fussing. This pattern reoccurs whenever the child has a demand the parents hesitate to fulfill.

- A couple fights. One partner leaves. The other accepts blame for the problem and begs forgiveness. The first partner returns, and a happy reunion takes place. Soon they fight again, and the pattern repeats.
- One friend is unhappy with the other. The unhappy person withdraws until the other asks what's wrong. "Nothing," the first replies. The questioning persists until the problem is finally out in the open. The friends then solve the issue and continue happily until the next problem arises, when the pattern repeats itself.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Taking Conflict Personally

"Don't take it so personally!" Maybe you've heard—or made—this accusation during a conflict. Communication scholars wanted to learn more about this phenomenon, which they labeled "Taking Communication Personally"—or *TCP* for short.

Researchers surveyed subjects who were in a variety of relationships. Across the board, respondents experienced less TCP in satisfying relationships than in unsatisfying ones. It wasn't clear whether TCP led to less satisfaction, or whether less satisfying relationships contributed to TCP. That's a question for further research to explore.

The researchers also found that respondents typically experienced more TCP in some relationships (such as romantic ones) than in others (such as friendships). This suggests that

taking conflict personally is less an *individual* trait than a *relational* one. You may be secure in one relationship and insecure in another. Rather than saying, "I take conflict too personally," it's more accurate and helpful to say, "I take conflict too personally when I'm with this particular person."

Consider a relationship where you get easily hurt, perhaps with a colleague, family member, or lover. Then examine how you communicate with each other. Perhaps there are toxic conflict patterns. If criticism and contempt are common in your exchanges, there may be good reason you take conflict personally in that relationship. Your choice then is to respond assertively rather than defensively—or perhaps to seek out a less-toxic relationship.

Hample, D., & Richards, A. S. (2019). Personalizing conflict in different interpersonal relationship types. *Western Journal of Communication, 83*, 190–209.

There's nothing inherently wrong with the interaction in many rituals (Olson, 2002). Consider the preceding examples. In the first, the child's whining may be the only way ~~she can~~ to get the parents' attention. In the second, both partners might use the fighting as a way to blow off steam, and both might find that the joy of a reunion is worth the grief of the separation. The third ritual might work well when one friend is more assertive than the other.

Rituals can cause problems, though, when they become the *only* way relational partners handle their conflicts. As you learned in Chapter 1, competent communicators have a large repertoire of behaviors, and they are able to choose the most effective response for a given

situation. Relying on one pattern to handle all conflicts is no more effective than using a screwdriver to handle every home repair or putting the same seasoning in every dish you cook; what works in one situation isn't likely to succeed in most others. Conflict rituals may be familiar and comfortable, but they aren't the best way to solve the variety of problems that come up in any relationship.

12.4 Conflict Management in Practice

The collaborative conflict management style described earlier in this chapter is a skill to be learned, and it pays off. An 11-year study following 100 couples who had conflict skills training found that it works for couples willing to focus on improving their relationships (Hahlweg & Richter, 2010).

Win-win problem solving can be enacted through a seven-step approach (adapted from Weider-Hatfield, 1981 and Raider et al., 2006). Notice how many of the skills that have been discussed throughout this book are incorporated in this process:

1. *Define your needs*. Begin by deciding what you want or need. Sometimes the answer is obvious, as in our earlier example of the neighbor whose loud music kept others awake. In other instances, however, the apparent problem masks a more fundamental one.

   Because your needs won't always be clear, it's often necessary to think about a problem alone, before approaching the other person involved. Talking to a third person can sometimes help you sort out your thoughts. In either case, you should explore both the apparent content of

your dissatisfaction and the relational issues that may lurk behind it.

2. *Share your needs with the other person.* Once you've defined your needs, it's time to share them with your partner. Two guidelines are important here. First, be sure to choose a time and place that is suitable. Unloading on a tired or busy partner lowers the odds that your concerns will be well received. Likewise, be sure you are at your best; don't bring an issue up when your anger may cause you to say things you'll later regret, when your discouragement blows the problem out of proportion, or when you're distracted by other business. Making a date to discuss the problem, such as after dinner or over a cup of coffee, often can boost the odds of a successful outcome.

   The second guideline for sharing a problem is to use the descriptive "I" language outlined in Chapter 6. In a tense situation, however, it may not be easy to start sharing your needs. Raider et al. (2006) recommend beginning with what they call *ritual sharing*, which is preliminary, casual conversation. The goal is to build rapport, establish common ground, and perhaps pick up information.

3. *Listen to the other person's needs.* Once your own wants and needs are clear, it's time to find out what the other person wants and needs. This phase requires active listening skills (as described in Chapter 8) and empathy (Jandt, 2017). Now is a good time to engage in paraphrasing, both to make sure the other person has been heard and to draw out additional

information. Research shows that communicating your understanding of your partner's perspective enhances relational satisfaction (Kellas et al., 2017).

Recognize that this stage might take some time. Before moving to generating solutions, both people need to believe they have been heard and that all the content and relational issues of their conflict are open for discussion. This might include exploring how previous issues (or even previous relationships) are affecting how they're communicating with each other about this particular conflict.

4. *Generate possible solutions.* In the next step, you and your partner try to think of ways to satisfy both your needs. You can best do so by brainstorming—inventing as many potential solutions as you can. Seek quantity without worrying about quality. Prohibit criticism of any idea, no matter how outlandish it may sound. An idea that seems farfetched can sometimes lead to a more workable one. Another rule of brainstorming is that ideas aren't personal property. If one person makes a suggestion, the other should feel free to suggest another solution that builds on or modifies the original one. The original suggestion and its offshoots are all potential solutions to consider later. As partners get over their possessiveness about ideas, defensiveness drops, and the best solution can be found without worrying about whose idea it is.
5. *Evaluate the possible solutions and choose the best one.* The time to evaluate the solutions is after they all have been

generated, after you feel you have exhausted all the possibilities. In this step, the possible solutions are reviewed for their ability to satisfy everyone's important goals. How does each solution stand up against ~~the~~ individual and mutual goals? Which solution satisfies the most goals? Partners need to work cooperatively in examining each solution and in finally selecting the best one—or perhaps some combination of ideas.

6. *Implement the solution*. Now it's time to try out the idea selected to see if it does, indeed, satisfy everyone's needs. Sometimes solutions that seem good in theory don't work well in practice. That's why it's important to engage in the final step of the conflict management process—the follow-up.
7. *Follow up on the solution*. To end the process after selecting and implementing a particular solution assumes that any solution is forever, that people remain constant, and that events never alter circumstances. Of course, this is not the case: As people and circumstances change, a particular solution may lose or increase its effectiveness. Regardless, a follow-up evaluation needs to take place.

@WORK

Managing Conflict via Email

When coworkers don't see eye to eye, what's the best way to manage conflict and solve problems? In some cases, email might be more productive than face-to-face conversations.

A group of communication scholars (Bulow et al., 2019) reviewed conflict-related correspondence and interviewed members of two international companies engaged in a collaborative project. The researchers learned that discussing conflicts via email led to better outcomes than did face-to-face conversations. They regarded the use of email "not as an unfortunate side-effect but as a strategic choice" that afforded the participants both protection and control.

As Chapter 2 explained, the asynchronous nature of email gives communicators a chance to craft and edit their messages, choosing words and phrasing carefully. It also affords recipients an opportunity to think about the message rather than feeling pressured to respond immediately. They don't have to worry about their own nonverbal behaviors (frowning, blushing,

eyerolling), or the nonverbal reactions of the other person. Finally, e-messages leave a record of interactions that provides a measure of accountability.

Managing workplace conflict via email has its critics (e.g., Hart, 2017). You can probably think of ways the features just noted could work to the detriment of interpersonal negotiations ("Why aren't they responding?" "What did they mean by that phrase?"). You and your colleagues will need to decide if email is a suitable tool for your particular conflict, and to follow best practices (Duru, 2019) if you opt to manage your conflict online.

After you've tested your solution for a short time, it's a good idea to plan a meeting to talk about how things are going. You may find that you need to make some changes or even rethink the whole problem. In addition, people can walk away from conflict sessions believing they agree on a resolution, when in fact they don't (Roloff et al., 2015). Following up can help ensure that partners are on the same page.

Table 12.3 walks through each stage of this process. What works for the couple in this scenario might not work for others, but that's what makes communication unique to each relationship. The key is to be satisfied with your solution.

TABLE 12.3 Walkthrough of the Conflict Management Process

Scenario: Brook and Anant have been seeing each other for several months and are now in an exclusive relationship. Brook calls or texts Anant frequently when they're

apart. Anant rarely initiates contact with Brook and usually doesn't respond to messages. Each is annoyed with the other's behavior.

Step	Example
1. Define your needs.	At first, Anant thinks the annoyance is only due to being interrupted while trying to focus on school and work. More self-examination shows that the irritation centers on the relational message Brook's calls seem to imply. Anant views the constant contact as a form of being monitored and perhaps as a sign that Brook doesn't trust what Anant is doing when they aren't together.
2. Share your needs with the other person.	After some preliminary, casual conversation (ritual sharing), Anant could offer this observation: "Brook, our relationship is very important to me, and I'm glad you want to keep in touch. I'm a bit concerned, however, about how often you call or text me. When I'm at school or work, or if I'm hanging out with my friends, I want to be able to focus on those activities. At times like that, your messages can seem like a distraction rather than a sign of affection. And I'll admit that I wonder *why* you're calling so often. Is there some sort of trust issue we need to discuss?" It's possible that Brook will have a defensive reaction to Anant's observation ("I can't believe you see my calls and texts as a *distraction*!"), but ideally the needs and concerns that drive the conversation will become clear.
3. Listen to the other person's needs.	Brook: "When I call and text you, it's my way of communicating that I'm thinking about you. When you don't respond, it hurts. I take it as a sign that you don't care about me as much as I care about you." Anant: "So you're saying that texts and calls are just a sign of care and concern, and they're not an attempt to monitor me?" This might allow Brook to explore the motives for messaging Anant. Brook might paraphrase Anant this way: "It sounds like you don't want to have contact with me when we're away from each other, and that you view my messages as an intrusion into your personal space." Anant can then clarify which parts of that interpretation are or are not accurate.

4. Generate possible solutions.	Anant and Brook use brainstorming to generate solutions for their problem. The list includes eliminating, limiting, continuing, or increasing the number of calls Brook makes to Anant. Likewise, Anant could reduce or increase responses to Brook. The couple could decide that text messages are preferable to voice messages, or that one type of contact (call or text) needs to be answered and the other doesn't. Day calls might be okay but not evening calls, or vice versa. Perhaps Anant could initiate calls; maybe Brook could contact other friends instead when wanting to chat. They might also discuss larger issues about how much time they spend together in person or with their friends. It could even be an opportunity to discuss whether they want to slow down or speed up their relationship. Although some of these solutions are clearly unacceptable to both partners, they list all the ideas they can think of, preparing themselves for the next step in win-win problem solving.
5. Evaluate the possible solutions and choose the best one.	Brook and Anant decide to limit texts and calls to two or three per day, and that Anant will initiate at least one of them. They also agree to briefly respond to the other's text messages when they're at social events, but not during school or work hours. Anant believes that fewer calls will communicate that Brook values autonomy and trusts their relationship. Brook thinks that messages Anant initiates or responds to will indicate that both are equally invested in the relationship.
6. Implement the solution.	Anant and Brook follow their new guidelines and, for the most part, are satisfied, but there are still some issues. If Brook contacts Anant simply to say, "I'll be home in 30 minutes," does that count? Likewise, if Anant initiates a message, but it's just about making arrangements, does that satisfy Brook?
7. Follow up on the solution.	Brook and Anant schedule a date to talk about their solution two weeks later. Over dinner, they both report feeling good about the new arrangements and realize that trust was indeed an issue for Brook. They agree to distinguish personal calls (which they will limit) from necessary calls to make arrangements as needed (which will have no constraints). Anant admits that initiating calls is challenging and decides to turn off the phone during school and work hours. Brook asks

	Anant to send a quick text when open for contact. Anant sees that as a good way to remember to send a check-in message each day.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 12.1 **Describe the nature of conflict and its attributes.**

Despite wishes and cultural myths to the contrary, conflict is a natural and unavoidable part of any relationship. Because conflict can't be escaped, the challenge is how to deal with it effectively so that it strengthens a relationship rather than weakens it. All conflicts possess the same characteristics: expressed struggle, interdependence, perceived incompatible goals, perceived scarce resources, and inevitability.

Q: Describe how the recurring conflicts in one of your important relationships embody the characteristics described in this section.

Objective 12.2 **Explain five styles of handling conflict and how they are communicated.**

Communicators can respond to conflicts in a variety of ways: avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, or collaboration. Each of these approaches can be justified in certain circumstances.

Q: Which of the five styles reflects your typical approach to conflicts? Which styles best describe those with whom you communicate? How satisfying are the results of using these styles? Would other styles be more effective?

Objective 12.3 **Recognize various communication patterns in relational conflicts.**

The way a conflict is handled isn't always the choice of a single person because the communicators influence one another. In some relationships, partners engage in complementary conflict, whereas in others, the approach is more symmetrical. Repetitive conflicts about the same issue are known as serial arguments. Some forms of communication during conflict are inherently toxic (the "Four Horsemen"): criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling. In ongoing relationships, partners often develop conflict rituals—repeated patterns of interlocking behavior.

Q: Do your conflicts with relational partners tend to be more complementary or symmetrical? Are they more constructive or destructive? Do you or the other person ever resort to using any of the "Four Horsemen"? If so, what are the effects? What conflict rituals characterize your disputes, and how beneficial are these rituals?

Objective 12.4 **Explain how the conflict management process can ideally resolve interpersonal conflicts.**

In most circumstances a collaborative, win-win outcome is the ideal, and it can be achieved by following the guidelines outlined in the last section of this chapter.

Q: Consider how the steps described in Section 12.4 could help you manage a conflict more productively. What parts prove most helpful? Which are most difficult?

ACTIVITIES

1. **Reflection:** Consider a recent interpersonal conflict you had—perhaps with a friend, family member, or romantic partner. Explain how these factors (from Section 12.1) were (or perhaps still are) at work in the conflict:
    a. Expressed struggle (when did the conflict come out the open?)
    b. Interdependence (how does what happens to one of you affect both of you?)
    c. Perceived incompatible goals (try to identify these specifically)
    d. Perceived scarce resources (try to identify these specifically)

    Does reflecting on these factors give you ideas for how the conflict might best be managed? If so, explain.
2. **Ethical Challenge:** The Dark Side box in Section 12.1 suggests, "It's not always wrong to ghost someone." Do you agree? See if you can identify a time when you or someone you know ghosted a third party and you thought it was ethically defensible. Now see if you can name a time when ghosting seemed like a less-than-ethical option. What factors make ghosting more or less justifiable?

3. **Self-Appraisal:** Identify a time when you used one of these four conflict styles—avoiding, accommodation, competition, or competition—and it *didn't* work well for you. Explain why that approach wasn't helpful in managing your conflict. Now identify a time when you used that same style and it *did* work well for you. What do those experiences tell you about the pros and cons of that conflict style and your use of it?
4. **Build Your Skill:** Reword each of the following "Four Horsemen" statements (Section 12.3.3) to make them less toxic:
    a. "You can be such a slob" (Criticism)
    b. "You're so thoughtless" (Criticism)
    c. "I'm not lazy—you are" (Defensiveness)
    d. "I never do that" (Defensiveness)
    e. "You're just a sexist pig" (Contempt)
    f. "So you finally cleaned the car—only took you six months." (Contempt)

Describe the role of "I" messages (Section 6.3.2) and description (13.3.1) in turning toxic comments into constructive ones.

Assessing Your Communication: Your Method of Conflict Management (Personal Practice)

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LIST OF KEY TERMS

Accommodation

Avoidance

Collaboration

competition

complementary conflict

compromise

conflict

conflict rituals

Contempt

Criticism

de-escalatory spiral

Defensiveness

direct aggression

escalatory spiral

Passive aggression

Serial arguments

Stonewalling

symmetrical conflict

win-win problem solving

CHAPTER 12 Flashcards

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13
Communication Climate

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **13.1** **Explain the nature of communication climates.**
- **13.2** **Describe how communication climates develop.**
- **13.3** **Distinguish the factors that create defensive versus supportive communication climates.**

13.4 Demonstrate ways to engage in casual conversations and civil dialogues.

> HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE your most important relationships? Warm? Stormy? Hot? Cold? Just as physical locations have characteristic weather patterns, interpersonal relationships have unique climates. You can't measure the interpersonal climate quite so precisely, but it's there nonetheless. Every relationship has a feeling, a pervasive mood that colors the goings-on of the participants.

13.1 What Is a Communication Climate?

The term **communication climate** refers to the social tone of a relationship. A climate doesn't involve specific activities so much as it involves the way people feel about each other as they carry out those activities. For example, consider two interpersonal communication classes. They meet for the same length of time and follow the same syllabus. One of these classes is a friendly, comfortable place to learn, whereas the other is cold and tense—even hostile. It's not the course content that differs—it's the way the people in the class feel about and treat each other (LaBelle & Johnson, 2021).

Just as every classroom has a unique climate, so does every relationship. Romances, friendships, and families—just like neighborhoods, cities, and countries—can be defined by their social tone. Another obvious context for observing a climate's impact is the workplace (Denning, 2019). Think for a moment: Have you ever held a job where backbiting, criticism, and suspicion were the norm? Or have you been lucky enough to work where the atmosphere was positive, encouraging, and supportive? If you've experienced both, you know what a difference climate makes. Not surprisingly, employees have a higher level of commitment at jobs in which they experience a positive communication climate (Reed et al., 2016).

This chapter explores several climate issues: how communication climates develop, how and why we respond defensively in certain climates, and what we can do to create positive climates and transform negative ones. The chapter—and book—concludes with a look at the art of conversation, and how to turn monologue into dialogue.

13.2 How Communication Climates Develop

How do some types of communication create a positive climate whereas others have the opposite effect? Essentially, communication climate is determined by the degree to which people see themselves as *valued*. Communicators who perceive others as liking, appreciating, and respecting them react positively, whereas those who feel unimportant or abused react negatively. Communication scholars use the term **confirming communication** to describe either direct or indirect messages that convey valuing (Weger & Tang, 2022). In one form or another, confirming messages essentially say, "You exist," "You matter," and "You're important." By contrast, **disconfirming communication** signals a lack of regard. In one form or another, disconfirming messages say, "You don't matter," "You're not important," or "You don't exist."

DARK SIDE OF COMMUNICATION

Cyberbullying: Inflicting Pain Online

Nearly 60 percent of U.S. teens have been bullied or harassed online (Anderson, 2018). Although middle school is the peak period for cyberbullying, it can start as early as grade school and continue into the college years and beyond (Vogels, 2021). Cyberbullying has been linked to a variety of negative consequences including poor academic performance, depression, withdrawal, drug and alcohol use, and even suicide (Kumar & Goldstein, 2020).

A key to stopping cyberbullying is blowing the whistle on perpetrators. Unfortunately, most adolescents are unwilling to do so for reasons ranging from fear of reprisal to fear of losing their social media privileges (Cassidy et al., 2013). They are far more likely to tell their friends than adults about online harassment, so many school programs encourage peer-led support and intervention.

Cyberbullying will remain a problem as long as it stays a secret and if those who witness it fail to intervene (Brody & Vangelisti, 2016). Most schools and companies have policies that can help provide protection. If you're being bullied online, keep copies of the harassing messages—and then contact an appropriate teacher, administrator, or supervisor. And if you know someone who is being victimized, be receptive and help arrange intervention. Open communication is vital to bringing cyberbullying out of the shadows.

For more information on this important topic, go to www.StopBullying.gov.

It's hard to overstate the importance of confirming messages and the impact of disconfirming ones. Children who feel confirmed have more open communication with their parents, higher self-esteem, and lower levels of stress (Dailey, 2009, 2010). Confirming communication by teachers has been shown to enhance in-class participation, particularly from students who are apprehensive about talking (Hsu & Huang, 2017). A confirming climate is also important in marriage, where it is the best predictor of marital satisfaction (Weger, 2005). And if children see their parents regularly engage in confirming communication with each other, they are likely to replicate those patterns in their own romantic relationships (Young & Schrodt, 2016).

The interpretation of a message as confirming or disconfirming is subjective. Consider, for example, times when you took a comment that might have sounded unsupportive to an outsider ("You're such a

nerd!") as a sign of affection within your relationship. Likewise, a comment that might have been intended as helpful ("I'm telling you this for your own good …") could easily be regarded as a condescending attack.

13.2.1 Levels of Message Confirmation

Figure 13.1 shows the range of confirming, disagreeing, and disconfirming messages, which are described in the following pages. Confirming messages show value to others, while disconfirming messages do not.

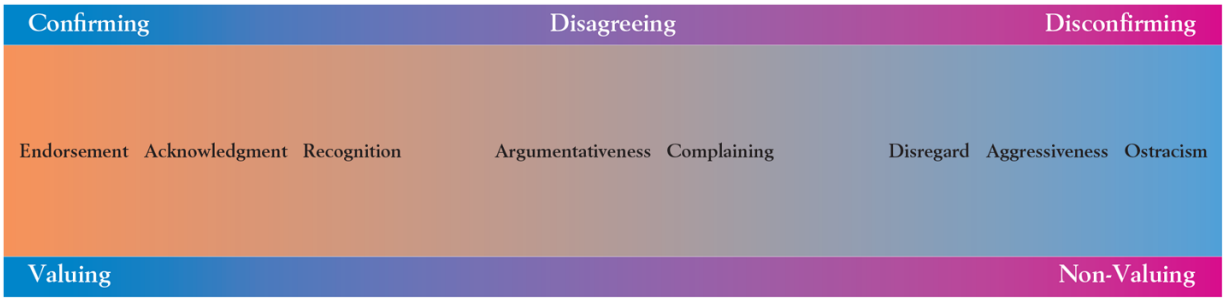


FIGURE 13.1 Message Types along the Confirmation–Disconfirmation Spectrum
View larger image

Confirming Messages

Even your best attempts at confirming messages can be misinterpreted. But three increasingly positive types of messages

have the best chance of being perceived as confirming: recognition, acknowledgment, and endorsement (Cissna & Sieburg, 2006).

Recognition

The most fundamental act of confirmation is **recognition**—the simple but important indication that you're aware of the other person. This can be done nonverbally—for example, by making eye contact or offering a smile. It can also be done verbally, with phrases such as "Glad to see you" or "I'll be right with you." On the other hand, avoiding eye contact can send a negative message. Consider what it's like when a store clerk fails to nonverbally signal that you're waiting for service (Harjunpaa et al., 2018). One retailer strives to greet customers within "ten feet and ten seconds" of walking in, believing those moments to be vital in creating customer loyalty (Gallo, 2012).

Acknowledgment

Paying attention to the ideas and feelings of others through **acknowledgment** is a stronger form of confirmation than simple recognition. Chapter 8 notes how listening and responding to another person demonstrates your interest and concern (Weger et al., 2014). Phrases such as "I see your point" or "I can understand how you feel" communicate acknowledgment—regardless of whether you agree with what's being said.

Endorsement

Whereas acknowledgment communicates interest, **endorsement** means that you agree with or support another person. Endorsement is the strongest type of confirming message because it communicates the highest form of valuing. You can verbally endorse others by agreeing with them ("You're right about that"), offering compliments ("Nice job handling that situation"), or giving praise ("That's the best presentation I've seen this year"). Getting recognition like this on the job helps workers "feel interpersonally significant, needed, unique, and particularly successful" (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2011).

The film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* tells the story of Fred Rogers, a pioneer in children's television programming. Rogers (played by Tom Hanks) had an unwavering and powerful message: Everyone is valuable and deserving of love. ***Can you identify a TV***

figure or other celebrity who modeled confirming communication for you? View larger image

Disagreeing Messages

Between confirming and disconfirming lies a type of message that isn't always easy to categorize. A **disagreeing message** essentially says, "You're wrong." In its most constructive form, disagreement includes two of the confirming components just described: recognition and acknowledgment ("I see your point but I've drawn a different conclusion"). At its worst, a strong disagreeing message can be so devastating that the benefits of recognition and acknowledgment are lost. Two ways to disagree without necessarily being disconfirming are argumentativeness and complaining.

Argumentativeness

Normally when you call a person "argumentative," you're making an unfavorable evaluation. However, the ability to create and deliver a sound argument is an admirable quality in lawyers, talk-show participants, and debaters. Taking a positive approach to the term, communication researchers define **argumentativeness** as presenting and defending positions on issues while opposing positions taken by others (Johnson et al., 2014). Argumentativeness can coincide with a number of positive attributes such as communicative competence (Howe & Cionea, 2021) and willingness to confront others when wronged (Miller & Roloff, 2014).

The *way* you present your ideas makes all the difference in maintaining a positive climate while arguing a point. It is crucial to be sure you are evaluating positions or issues, not attacking people. There's a world of difference between "That's a stupid idea" and "I disagree—let me explain why." The supportive kinds of messages outlined in Section 12.3.3 show how you can argue in a respectful, constructive way.

Complaining

When communicators don't want to argue but still want to register dissatisfaction, they can engage in **complaining** (Higgs, 2020). Like all disagreeing messages, some ways of complaining are more constructive than others. Satisfied couples tend to offer behavioral complaints ("I don't like that you always throw your socks on the floor"), whereas unsatisfied couples make more complaints aimed at personal characteristics ("You're a slob") (Feuerman, 2021). Personal complaints are more likely to result in an escalated conflict episode. The reason is obvious—complaints about personal characteristics attack a more fundamental part of the presenting self. Talking about socks deals with a habit that can be changed; calling someone a slob is a character assault that is unlikely to be forgotten when the conflict is over.

Marriage researcher John Gottman has found that complaining isn't necessarily a sign of a troubled relationship—in fact, it's usually healthy for spouses to get their concerns out in the open (Beatty, 2017). Other scholars (Worley & Samp, 2018) agree that "communicating complaints openly to one's partner, in concert with

positive politeness" can strengthen rather than weaken relationships. However, when couples' complaining turns to criticism and contempt, it is often a symptom of relational trouble (see Section 12.3.3).

Disconfirming Messages

Disconfirming messages can be subtler than disagreeing ones but are potentially more damaging. Disconfirming communication implicitly says, "I don't value you"; "You don't exist." Three message types that fall into this category are disregard, aggressiveness, and ostracism.

Disregard

When you show **disregard** for another person, you treat their messages as unimportant or nonexistent. Disregard is often communicated in small ways (Cissna & Sieburg, 2006). When you're making an important point during a conversation and a friend interrupts, you probably feel devalued. The same may be true if that friend goes off on an irrelevant tangent, gives an impersonal response ("It's no big deal—these things happen"), or ignores your message altogether. You can assess the level of regard and confirmation in one of your friendships by completing the Assessing Your Communication quiz at the end of the chapter.

Watch and Discuss 13.1: "Have You Heard About Phubbing?"

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Describe how phubbing can communicate *disregard* and disrespect. Has phubbing had an impact on any of your relationships?
2. With whom do you identify in this video: Sherrice or Jashon? That is, are you typically the phubber or the phubbee in your relationships?

The advent of smartphones produced a new kind of disregarding. **Phubbing** is the act of snubbing others (intentionally or not) while attending to your portable device (Leuppert & Geber, 2020). MIT professor Sherry Turkle (2015) refers to this as being physically present yet mentally absent:

> The mere presence of a phone signals that your attention is divided, even if you don't intend it to be. It will limit the conversation in many ways: how you'll listen, what will be discussed, the degree of connection you'll feel. Rich conversations have difficulty competing with even a silent phone. To clear a path for conversation, set aside laptops and tablets. Put away your phone.

Phubbers fail to give nonverbal recognition cues like smiles and eye contact to their in-person conversational partners (Kushlev et al.,

2019). Phubbing your boss will likely be perceived as disrespectful (Roberts & David, 2017), and your romantic partner won't appreciate it either (Thomas et al., 2022). In face-to-face interaction, it's important to confirm your conversational partner with your attention. (See Activity 1 at the end of the chapter for an ethical challenge about phubbing.)

Aggressiveness

Verbal **aggressiveness** is the tendency to attack another person's character, background, or identity (Xie et al., 2015). Unlike argumentativeness, aggressiveness demeans the worth of others and is corrosive to relationships (Roper et al., 2017). Name-calling, put-downs, sarcasm, taunting, yelling, badgering—and even some types of barbed humor—all are methods of "winning" disagreements at others' expense. Communication research has linked aggressiveness to a host of negative outcomes such as lowered self-esteem, occupational burnout, juvenile delinquency, depression, violence, and even mortality (Rancer & Avtgis, 2014). Aggressiveness is often learned in one's family (Aloia, 2018). Children raised in verbally aggressive families have higher tendencies toward trait anger and greater difficulty engaging in forgiveness (Aloia & Pederson, 2021). Aggressiveness is especially dangerous when mixed with alcohol (Eckhardt et al., 2019).

One form of aggressiveness—bullying—has received a good deal of attention in the media and from communication scholars (Goodboy et al., 2016; Tye-Williams et al., 2020). The word *bully* often conjures up images of a tough kid on the school playground, but

bullying occurs in a variety of contexts. For instance, it can take place within families (Berry & Adams, 2016), with sibling bullying having long-lasting effects (Toosab & Wolke, 2022). Bullying can also occur between bosses and employees (Moss, 2016), doctors and nurses (Robbins, 2015), and professors and students (Martin et al., 2015). As the Dark Side box in Section 13.2 describes, the internet gives bullies even more channels for engaging in verbal aggressiveness.

If you're on the receiving end of bullying behaviors, it's important to find appropriate and constructive ways to respond. It's possible to send clear, firm messages that are assertive (standing up for yourself) rather than aggressive (putting others down). For instructions on creating assertive "I" statements and using the language of choice, refer to Section 6.3.2. For details on win-win versus win-lose approaches to conflict management, see Section 12.2.

The TV series *Inventing Anna*, based on a true story, depicts how Anna Delvey (Julia Garner) regularly gets her way through aggressiveness and bullying—and as a result, ruins most of her interpersonal relationships. ***Explain how aggressiveness involves both winning and losing.*** View larger image

Ostracism

It's bad enough to be treated poorly. It can be even worse to be ignored altogether. **Ostracism** has been called "the social death penalty" because it purposely excludes others from interaction (Wesselmann & Williams, 2017). Most people can recall hurtful childhood experiences of being ostracized by a group (Wölfer & Scheithauer, 2014). This kind of disconfirmation also happens in

adulthood. It can be as simple as being left out of social media posts and their tags (Buttner & Rudert, 2022). On a more serious level, workplace studies show that employees would rather receive negative attention from bosses and coworkers than no attention at all (O'Reilly et al., 2015). Many report that ostracism is even more painful and damaging than harassment. (See Activity 2 at the end of the chapter for a reflection and video on this topic.)

Ostracism usually involves exclusion from a group, but it can also take place in one-on-one interaction. Chapter 12 describes several variations on this theme: the silent treatment, ghosting, and stonewalling (Austin, 2021). The power of ostracism illustrates a principle introduced in Chapter 1: You can't *not* communicate. Withholding interaction from others sends a message. In some cases it can be the most disconfirming message of all.

13.2.2 Causes and Effects of Defensiveness

It's no surprise that some disagreeing and most disconfirming messages can pollute a communication climate. Perhaps the most predictable reaction to a hostile or indifferent message is defensiveness.

The word *defensiveness* suggests protecting yourself from attack, but what kind of attack if not physical? To answer this question, we need to talk more about notions of *presenting self* and *face*, both of which were introduced in Chapter 4. Recall that the presenting self consists

of the physical traits, personality characteristics, attitudes, aptitudes, and all the other parts of the image you want to present to the world. Actually, it is a mistake to talk about a single face; we try to project different selves to different people. (For instance, you might try to impress a potential employer with your seriousness but want your friends to see you as a joker.)

When others are willing to accept and acknowledge important parts of our presenting image, there is no reason to feel defensive. However, when others confront us with **face-threatening acts**—messages we perceive as challenging the image we want to project—we are likely to resist what they say. Defensiveness, then, is the process of protecting our presenting self, our face. Although responding defensively to a face-threatening attack may seem logical, over time, defensiveness erodes relationship stability (Gunther, 2017).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

When Defensiveness Thwarts Support

A couple you know well is in a marriage that could be described as "turbulent." One partner confides in you about a recent spat, and you try to offer a supportive response. Instead of feeling comforted, your friend gets defensive. What went wrong? A research team led by Kellie St. Cyr Brisini suggests that you might have challenged your friend's self-image of "spouse in a rocky marriage."

In a study of nearly 500 participants, there was a significant link between marital turbulence and negative reactions to supportive messages. Partners in turbulent marriages tended to get defensive when friends offered words intended to comfort. The researchers put it this way:

> … people's investment in their conception of their relationship as turbulent may lead them to reject messages that suggest relationship difficulties are short-lived or resolvable.

In other words, if you offer supportive words to someone in a troubled relationship, that person might regard you as naïve

and respond, "You just don't understand."

As this section describes, face-threatening acts often lead to defensiveness—even if the face being defended isn't necessarily a positive one.

St. Cyr Brisini, K., Solomon, D. H., & Tian, X. (2022). Relational turbulence and openness to social network support for marital conflicts. *Western Journal of Communication, 86,* 83–102.

To understand how defensiveness operates, imagine what might happen if an important part of your presenting self were attacked. For instance, suppose an instructor criticized you in front of the class for making a mistake. Or consider how you would feel if a friend called you self-centered or your boss labeled you as lazy. You would probably feel threatened if these attacks were untrue. But your own experience will probably show that you sometimes respond defensively even when you know that others' criticism is justified. For instance, you have probably responded defensively at times when you *did* make a mistake, act selfishly, or cut corners in your work. In fact, we often feel most defensive when criticism is right on target (Wenzel et al., 2020). Later in this chapter, we discuss how to respond nondefensively in such situations.

So far, we have talked about defensiveness as if it were only the responsibility of the person who felt threatened. If this were the case, then the prescription would be simple: Toughen up, admit your flaws, and stop trying to manage impressions. This approach isn't just unrealistic—it also ignores the role played by those who send face-threatening messages. In fact, competent communicators protect others' face needs as well as their own. Skilled instructors

carefully protect their students' presenting faces, especially when offering constructive criticism (Hadden & Frisby, 2019). This facework leads to less defensive responses from their students. Similarly, wise students craft their emails politely when making requests of their teachers, showing them appropriate respect (Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012). Findings like this make it clear that defensiveness is *interactive:* All communicators contribute to the climate of a relationship.

13.3 Creating Supportive Climates

Even the most positive message isn't guaranteed to create a positive climate. Praise can be interpreted as sarcasm; an innocent smile can be perceived as a sneer; an offer to help can be seen as condescension. Because human communication is so complex, there aren't any foolproof words, phrases, or formulas for creating positive climates. Nonetheless, research suggests strategies that can increase the odds of creating and maintaining positive relational climates—even when the message you're delivering is a tough one.

Several decades ago, psychologist Jack Gibb isolated six types of defense-arousing communication and six contrasting behaviors that seem to reduce defensiveness (1961; see also 2008). These "Gibb categories" are listed in Table 13.1. Gibb's findings have commonsense appeal and multiple applications. As a result, they've played an important part in communication textbooks, training seminars, journals, and research studies (e.g., Bradley & Campbell, 2016; Forward et al., 2011). Understanding them helps explain how positive climates can be created by sending supportive rather than defense-provoking messages.

TABLE 13.1 The Gibb Categories of Defense-Provoking Versus Supportive Behaviors

Defense-Provoking Behaviors	Supportive Behaviors
1. Evaluation	1. Description
2. Control	2. Problem Orientation
3. Strategy	3. Spontaneity
4. Neutrality	4. Empathy
5. Superiority	5. Equality
6. Certainty	6. Provisionalism

13.3.1 Evaluation Versus Description

The first type of defense-arousing message is **evaluation**, which judges another person, usually in a negative way. For instance, consider this message: "You don't care about me!" Evaluative messages such as this possess several characteristics that make them face threatening. They judge what the other person is feeling rather than describing the speaker's thoughts, feelings, and wants. They don't explain how the speaker arrived at their conclusion, and they lack specifics. Furthermore, they're often phrased in the kind of defense-arousing "you" language described in Section 6.3.2.

Do the climate-threatening properties of evaluative messages mean it's impossible to register a legitimate complaint? No. They simply mean that you must be alert to more constructive ways to do so.

Description is a way to offer your thoughts, feelings, and wants without judging the listener.

Descriptive messages make documented observations that are specific and concrete. They focus on behavior that can be changed rather than on personal characteristics that cannot. In addition, descriptive messages often use "I" language, which tends to provoke less defensiveness than "you" language (Rogers et al., 2018). Contrast the evaluative "You don't care about me" with this more descriptive message: "I'm sorry we don't spend as much time together as we did during the summer. When we don't talk during the week, I sometimes feel unimportant. Maybe we could try to text each other once a day—that would mean a lot to me."

Let's look at more examples of the difference between evaluative and descriptive messages:

Evaluation	Description
You're not making any sense.	I'm not clear on the point you're making.
You're inconsiderate.	I would appreciate it if you'd let me know when you're running late—I was worried.
That's an ugly tablecloth.	I'm not crazy about big blue stripes; I like something more subtle.

Note several characteristics of these descriptive messages. First, their focus is on the speaker's thoughts, feelings, and wants, with little or no judgment of the other person. Second, the messages address specific behaviors rather than making sweeping character generalizations. The messages also provide information about how the speaker arrived at these conclusions. Finally—and perhaps most important—notice that each of the descriptive statements is just as honest as its evaluative counterpart. Once you have learned to speak descriptively, you can be straightforward while avoiding personal attacks that can poison a climate.

13.3.2 Control Versus Problem Orientation

A second defense-provoking message involves some attempt to control another person. **Controlling communication** occurs when a sender seems to be imposing a solution on the receiver, with little regard for that person's needs or interests. The object of control can involve almost anything: where to eat dinner, how to spend a large sum of money, or whether to remain in a relationship. The unspoken message of controlling communication is, "I know what's best for you, and if you do as I say, we'll get along." Not surprisingly, people tend to respond defensively to such messages, and they also resist complying (Frey et al., 2021).

In **problem orientation**, by contrast, communicators focus on finding a solution that satisfies both their own needs and those of the

others involved. The goal here isn't to "win" at the expense of your partner but to work out some arrangement in which everybody feels like a winner. (Chapter 12 has a great deal to say about "win-win" problem solving as a way to find problem-oriented solutions.) Problem orientation is often typified by "we" language (see Section 6.3.2), which suggests that the speaker is making decisions *with* rather than *for* other people (Seider et al., 2009).

Here are some examples of how some controlling versus problem-oriented messages might sound:

Controlling	**Problem Oriented**
Get off your phone—now!	I really need to talk soon. Can you take a break so we can chat?
There's only one way to handle this problem …	Looks like we have a problem. Let's work out a solution we can both live with.
Either you start working harder, or you're fired!	The production in your department hasn't been as high as I'd hoped. Any ideas on what we could do?

13.3.3 Strategy Versus Spontaneity

Gibb uses the word **strategy** to characterize defense-arousing messages in which speakers hide their ulterior motives. The terms *dishonesty* and *manipulation* reflect the nature of strategy. Even if the intentions that motivate strategic communication are honorable, the victim of deception is likely to feel offended.

As Chapter 8 explains, counterfeit questions are a form of strategic communication because they try to trap others into desired responses. Many sales techniques are strategic; for example, they may give customers limited information and then make it difficult to say no. This is not to say that all sales techniques are wrong or

unethical, but most strategic ones aren't well suited for interpersonal relationships. If you've ever become defensive when you thought a friend was doing a "sales job" on you, you understand the concept.

In contrast with strategy, **spontaneity** is being honest with others rather than manipulating them. What it *doesn't* mean is blurting out what you're thinking as soon as an idea comes to you (Hample et al., 2013). Gibb recognized the dangers of hidden agendas that others both sense and resist. You can probably recall times when someone asked you a question and you suspiciously responded with "Hmmm … why do you want to know?" Your defensive antennae were up because you detected an underlying strategy. If the person had told you up front the reason for the question, then your defenses probably would have been lowered. Here are some examples that illustrate the difference between strategy and spontaneity:

Strategy	Spontaneity
What are you doing Friday after work?	I have a piano I need to move Friday after work. Can you give me a hand?
Have you ever considered another line of work?	I'm concerned about your job performance over the last year; let's set up a time to talk about it.
Ali and Kasey go out to dinner every week.	I'd like to go out for dinner more often.

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Maintaining a Supportive Classroom Climate

You've probably witnessed a student challenging an instructor in class—perhaps a testy question about course content or a snarky remark about a class policy. The instructor has a choice—to respond defensively or to communicate in a way that maintains a supportive classroom climate.

Communication researchers asked students to describe moments like these that they had witnessed in college classrooms. They were then asked to describe how the instructor responded. Effective instructors, as judged by the participants, engaged in these behaviors:

- *Discussion vs. dismissal:* Effective instructors posed follow-up questions to either the challenging student

("So how would you handle this?") or to the class ("What do you all think?"). This often led to fruitful discussions—much better than dismissing the topic ("We don't have time for this").

- *Explaining vs. ignoring:* Participants appreciated hearing reasons for policies ("Here's why I don't allow extra credit"). That was deemed more effective than ignoring confrontation ("I was disappointed that the teacher didn't address the aggressive comment"), which had a chilling effect on the classroom climate.
- *Composure vs. escalation:* Instructors who exhibited "a calm, collected attitude" were regarded as more effective than those who lashed back. Participants said that some teachers actually apologized for mistakes they made—which increased rather than diminished their students' respect.

Ultimately, instructors who maintained a supportive classroom climate were judged as "competent and professional"—an appraisal any teacher would appreciate hearing.

Chesebro, J. L., & Lyon, A. (2020). Instructor responses to disruptive student classroom behavior: A study of brief critical incidents. *Communication Education, 69*, 135–154.

13.3.4 Neutrality Versus Empathy

Gibb used the term **neutrality** to describe a fourth behavior that arouses defensiveness. Probably a better word would be *indifference*.

Using Gibb's terminology, a neutral attitude is disconfirming because it communicates a lack of concern for the welfare of another and implies that the other person isn't very important to you. Consider confessing a problem to someone ("I flunked the test"; "I lost my job") and hearing, "Oh well—these things happen" or "It's not the end of the world." You probably would appreciate less indifference and more concern. And perhaps you'd respond defensively: "Wow, don't you even care?"

The behavior that contrasts with neutrality is **empathy**, showing care for the feelings of another. Research has shown that empathy minimizes potential threats to self-concept (Bradley & Campbell, 2016). It's important to note that accepting others' feelings and putting yourself in their place is separate from agreeing with them. By simply letting someone know about your care and respect, you'll be acting in a supportive way. You read about the concept of empathy in Section 5.4.2 and the skill of empathizing in Section 8.4.4. Here is what empathic messages look like when contrasted with neutral ones:

Neutrality	Empathy
This is what happens when you don't plan properly.	I'm so sorry this didn't turn out the way you expected.
Sometimes things just don't work out. That's the way it goes.	I know you put a lot of time and effort into this project.

Don't get too excited—everybody gets promoted sooner or later.	I'll bet you're pretty excited about the promotion.

13.3.5 Superiority Versus Equality

A fifth behavior creating a defensive climate involves **superiority**, sending patronizing messages either explicitly or implicitly. A body of research describes how such messages irritate receivers, particularly (but not only) when they're based on age, gender, or race (Atkinson & Sloan, 2017; Ilie, 2018). Any message that suggests "I'm better than you" is likely to arouse feelings of defensiveness in the recipients.

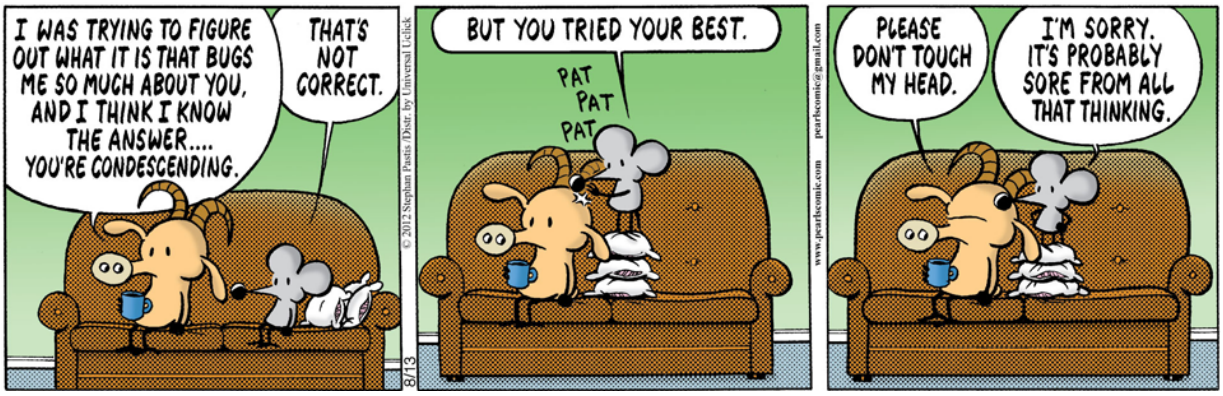
We often communicate with people who possess less talent or knowledge than we do, but it isn't necessary to convey an attitude of superiority in these situations. Gibb found ample evidence that many who have superior skills and talents are capable of projecting feelings of **equality** rather than superiority. Such people communicate that although they may have greater talent in certain areas, they see other human beings as having just as much worth.

Equality is put to the test when a person *doesn't* have superior skills yet is in a position of authority (Cain & Lebowitz, 2019). Supervisors sometimes have less expertise in certain areas than their subordinates but believe it would be beneath them to admit it. Think for a moment: You've probably been in situations where you knew more about the subject than the person in charge—be it a boss, a

teacher, a parent, or a salesperson—yet this person acted as if they knew more. Did you feel defensive? No doubt. Did that person feel defensive? Probably. You both were challenging each other's presenting self, so the climate most likely became hostile. A truly secure person can treat others with equality even when there are obvious differences in knowledge, talent, and status. Doing so creates a positive climate in which ideas are evaluated not on the basis of who contributed them, but rather on the merits of the ideas themselves.

What does equality sound like? Here are some examples:

Superiority	**Equality**
When you get to be in my position someday, then you'll understand.	I'd like to hear how the issue looks to you. Then I can tell you how it looks to me.
No, not that way! Let me show you how to do it right.	What if you tried it this way?
You really believe that?	Here's another way to think about it …


I WAS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT IT IS THAT BUGS ME SO MUCH ABOUT YOU, AND I THINK I KNOW THE ANSWER.... YOU'RE CONDESCENDING.
THAT'S NOT CORRECT.
BUT YOU TRIED YOUR BEST.
PAT PAT PAT
PLEASE DON'T TOUCH MY HEAD.
I'M SORRY. IT'S PROBABLY SORE FROM ALL THAT THINKING.
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13.3.6 Certainty Versus Provisionalism

Have you ever run into people who are positive they're right, who know that theirs is the only or proper way of doing something, who insist that they have all the facts and need no additional information? If you have, you know the defense-arousing behavior Gibb calls **certainty**.

Communicators who dogmatically regard their own opinions with certainty while disregarding the ideas of others demonstrate a lack of regard for others. It's likely that the receiver will take the certainty as a personal affront and react defensively.

In contrast to certainty is **provisionalism**, in which people express openness to others' ideas and opinions. You may have strong opinions yourself, but in this supportive style of communication, you acknowledge that you don't have a corner on the truth. Provisionalism often surfaces in word choice. Whereas people acting with certainty regularly use the terms *can't*, *never*, *always*, *must*,

and *have to*, those acting with provisionalism use *perhaps*, *maybe*, *possibly*, *might*, and *could* (Yeomans et al., 2020). It's not that provisional people are spineless; they simply recognize that discussion is aided by open-minded messages and a little "intellectual humility" (Resnick, 2019).

Researchers found that when teachers use provisional language, it helps motivate students (Katt & Collins, 2013). For instance, students responded more favorably to the critique "Your introduction could have been developed more thoroughly" than to the starker "The introduction was not well developed."

Let's look at some examples:

Certainty	**Provisionalism**
That will never work!	My guess is that you'll run into problems with that approach. You might want to try …
You'll hate that class! Stay away from it!	I didn't like that class very much; I'm not sure you would, either.
You won't get anywhere without a college education—mark my words.	I think it's important to get that degree. I found it was hard to land an interview until I had one.

You've probably noticed a good deal of overlap among the various Gibb categories. For instance, look at the final example under provisionalism. The statement is likely to create a positive climate not only because it is provisional rather than certain, but also because it is descriptive rather than evaluative, problem oriented rather than controlling, and equal rather than superior. You may also have noticed a tone underlying all of the supportive examples: *respect*. By valuing and confirming others—even if you disagree with them—you create a respectful climate that helps enhance a positive communication climate, both now and in future interactions.

13.4 Conversation: From Monologue to Dialogue

> You ask a coworker, "How was your weekend?" Five minutes later, he still hasn't taken a pause during his long, rambling response. You were hoping you'd get to tell about your weekend too.
>
> You're driving home from a party and realize you learned a lot about each person you talked with, but none of them learned much about you. You're wondering whose fault that was—theirs or yours?
>
> On the first day of class you introduce yourself to the person sitting next to you. That person responds in kind. This exchange is followed by several seconds of awkward silence. You both grab your phones and start texting.

Some critics argue that conversation is a "lost art" (Mipham, 2017) and that digital technology has played a role in its demise (Tracy, 2019). In her book *Reclaiming Conversation*, MIT researcher Sherry Turkle (2015) paints a familiar but discouraging picture:

> At the dinner table, children compete with smartphones for their parents' attention. At work, we retreat to our screens, forgoing the water-cooler conversation that once made us more productive and engaged. Online, we share opinions that our friends will agree with, avoiding the real conflicts and solutions of the public square.
>
> But there is good news: conversation cures. Face-to-face dialogue builds empathy, friendship, and creativity; it's the cornerstone of democracy and good for the bottom line.

It's possible to reclaim the art of conversation. The principles outlined in these pages will be useful for communication via any medium, but the focus will be on face-to-face interaction—with

people you've just met, but also with friends, family, and coworkers. You'll learn skills for holding casual conversations, and also for managing difficult ones.

13.4.1 Casual Conversation

It's impossible to provide a step-by-step recipe for becoming a good conversationalist. But there are general principles and skills you can use to make conversations more comfortable, interesting, and enjoyable. Even if you're a chatty extrovert, the advice here can be helpful.

Make Introductions

Introducing yourself is a surefire way to begin a conversation with someone you don't know (Pillet-Shore, 2018). In U.S. culture that often involves direct eye contact, a warm smile, and a clear stating of your name: "Hi, I'm Jasmine Brown." It can also be helpful to offer orienting information: "I'm Jamal's friend, and he said I should get in contact with you" or "I'm new to the company and work in the HR department." Ideally, the other person will reciprocate with similar information. If not, go ahead and ask: "And your name is?" or "Please remind me which department you're in."

You probably know what it's like to have someone come up and start talking to you at an event, and you can't recall that person's name or how you know them. That's uncomfortable for everyone, so make it

your practice to introduce—or reintroduce—yourself if there's any question that the other person remembers you. When in doubt, it doesn't hurt to offer your info again: "Hi Kris—I'm Sam. I met you at Monique's party last year."

Ask and Listen

You don't have to be a witty and charming speaker to have a good conversation. If you're at a loss for words, the best approach is to focus on *listening*. Award-winning NPR host Terry Gross calls this "being genuinely curious" (Kerr, 2018).

Asking questions is an excellent way to get others to open up (Huang et al., 2017). What you ask will be dictated by the nature of your relationship and the context. It wouldn't be good form to ask a person you've just met, "Tell me about your hopes and dreams." It's better to start slowly. You could open with "What brings you to this event?" or "How do you know the host?" With someone you've previously met, you could begin by recalling things you remember about them: "The last time we talked, you were applying for new jobs—how did that turn out?" or "I saw online that you're training for a half marathon. Tell me how that's going."

Notice that the preceding queries are *open questions*—ones that can't be answered in a word or two (see Section 8.4.2). Many parents learn the hard way that asking their children closed questions is a nonstarter. Queries like "How was your day?" or "Did you learn anything interesting at school?" can generate terse answers like "Fine" and "No." It's better to phrase the questions more openly: "What was the best part of your day at school?" or "Tell me about your math test today—I know you studied hard for it."

Here are some open conversational questions that could be used in a variety of situations:

- What do you like best about your new phone (or school or boss or sweetheart)?
- I'd love to hear your goals for this project (or relationship or workout or year).
- Tell me what you think (or feel or want) about this decision (or person or situation).

Reciprocate

If someone asks you a conversational question, an unspoken social rule is to return the favor (Sprecher & Treger, 2015). "How's your family?" merits a return at some point: "And how about *your* family?" One reason reciprocity is a good idea is that speakers often ask questions about topics *they* would like to talk about. The person who inquires about your family might respond to your reciprocal question with, "Actually, my mom's not doing too well. …"

Beyond reciprocal questions, good conversationalists take cues about topics that interest the other person. If your partner talks about sports, exercise, or food, it's a safe bet to stay on that subject if you're able (Hoey, 2018). It's also fine to say, "I don't know much about football, but it's fun to see everybody so excited about our team." Reciprocal questions and topics show that you're paying attention to what interests the other person.

Take Your Turn

At some point in a conversation, it will be your turn to talk—and it's important to contribute your fair share to the interaction (Hirschi et al., 2022). That might involve answering a question, offering information, telling a story, or making a disclosure. Here are a few principles to follow when you have the floor:

- *Keep it focused.* You probably know a friend who goes on tangents. For instance, when you ask, "How was your weekend?" a rambling response might sound like this:

> "Well, on Saturday—or wait, was it Friday? No, it had to be Saturday, because I stayed home on Friday. Actually, now that I think about it, it was Friday because that's when Angelica called. She called because her cat ran away. Her cat always runs away. I have no idea why she got that cat. I keep telling her. …"

You never get to hear what your friend did that weekend. Nor do you care anymore.

It's usually best to follow talk show host Celeste Headlee's (2017) advice and "stay out of the weeds." She warns "extraneous detail can be the death of a good conversation." Stick to key points and try not to get sidetracked.

- *Keep it short*. For any story you have to tell, you probably know the long version and the short version. It's a good idea to stick with the brief one if you want to keep a conversation flowing. Headlee has chapter titles that capture this theme: "Get Off the Soapbox"; "Keep It Short"; and "No Repeats."
- *Keep it interesting*. Analyze your audience and stick to topics *they* care about. Your passion for dance might interest one family member but bore another to tears. Of course, there are times when you want to tell your partner about the details of your job, and your partner isn't all that excited about what you do for a living. But you can find ways to focus on parts of your work that are more interesting than others.
- *Keep it appropriate*. Keep in mind that others might take offense at your controversial opinions or your sense of humor. It's smart to stick to safe topics until you have a better feel for the sensitivities of your conversational partner. Oversharing is another risk: Exercise caution about spilling

too many personal details to someone you just met. Or to a work colleague. Or to a blabbermouth.

You can see these conversational principles at work in the following answer to the question "Tell me about the first concert you attended." It's easy to identify ways you could respond *poorly*, but here's a *good* example that one student offered:

> When I was 12, I begged my parents to let me see Taylor Swift in concert. My dad drew the short straw, so he got to chaperone me and three of my friends. The concert was great, even though we sat in the last row of the upper deck. But what I remember most is that despite it being crazy loud, my dad *fell asleep!* He actually *snored* during the encore while we were all cheering and screaming. We had to wake him up when it was over. I was a little embarrassed at the time, but now it's one of my favorite memories.

There are several reasons this story works well. It's concise, interesting, and fun. It doesn't "get in the weeds" about where the concert was held, who the friends were, or what songs were sung. There are word pictures that liven the narrative ("begged my parents"; "last row of the upper deck"; "crazy loud"; "snored while we were cheering"). And the admission at the end adds a personal touch. No wonder vivid storytelling like this can pique listener engagement (Schmalzle et al., 2022) and create relational bonds (Cole & Beike, 2019). (See Activity 3 at the end of the chapter for a skill builder about telling good conversational stories.)

@WORK

Telling STAR Stories in Job Interviews

It's been said that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Following this reasoning, many employers use

behavioral questions in their selection interviews (Zhang, 2022). Rather than asking what you *think* (e.g., "What are your greatest strengths?") or what you *might* do in a hypothetical scenario, an employer will learn more by asking what you've actually done in previous situations. Behavioral queries include, "Tell me about a time you dealt with an unhappy customer" or "Give me an example of how you provided leadership in a work team."

Ideal responses require interviewees to tell good stories, just as in conversations. A "story" doesn't mean an exaggerated tale or a fictional account. It's about offering a real-life example of your on-the-job behavior, told clearly and concisely.

A commonly prescribed way to tell your story is the STAR method (Doyle, 2022). This acronym stands for Situation/Task, Action, and Result. You provide a quick backdrop about the scenario, describe what you did, and then explain how it turned out. See if you can spot the STAR components in this answer to the question "When have you been a problem-solver?"

> One afternoon my manager asked me to take over for a few hours while she ran some company errands. It was my bad luck that one of our machines broke down while she was gone. I called the repair service and they fixed it before my boss returned. In the meantime, I steered customers toward products that didn't require the machine. My manager was pleased that I handled the problem and that sales remained steady while she was away. She mentioned it during my performance review a few months later when she promoted me to assistant manager.

Being ready to address behavioral questions will serve you well. Even if an interviewer doesn't frame queries in behavioral

terms, you can probably use your prepared stories to illustrate your strong points.

Stay Aware and Adapt

Chapter 1 identifies self-monitoring as a feature of competent communication. Pay attention not only to what you're saying, but also to how your partner is reacting (Bruno & Gareth, 2014). Ask yourself questions like *Have I been talking too long? Did I reciprocate? Was that TMI?* It's important to read the nonverbal cues discussed in Chapter 7. Eye contact, facial expression, and body movement offer important clues about how the conversation is going (if your partner's eyes are glazing over, it's time to change things up). And if you're not quite sure, you could engage in metacommunication: "I've been talking too much—I want to hear more about you" or "I hope you don't mind that I shared that with you."

Staying aware doesn't mean being hypervigilant or overly self-critical. The goal is simply to assess how the conversation is going while you're in the midst of it—and then adapt. If you think you're losing your audience, you may want to ask a question or shift topics. If the other person has done most of the talking, it might be time to jump in and take your turn at the next pause. And of course, you have the option of drawing the conversation to a close: "It's been nice chatting with you—I'm looking forward to doing it again sometime."

13.4.2 Civil Dialogue

It would be easy if all conversations were about shared interests, uplifting topics, and enjoyable stories. Sooner or later, though, you'll find yourself engaging with someone whose views differ from yours—often dramatically.

Here are examples of some challenging situations:

> My parents have always hoped, prayed, and expected that I will marry in our faith. I've met someone and we are right for one another in so many ways—except our religious backgrounds are different. Last week I finally told my family. My mom sobbed and my dad went ballistic. I hope there's a way we can talk about this without hysterics.
>
> My sister just told the family that she is—I mean, they are—nonbinary. We're still learning what that means, but we love and support them. The problem is that my roommate (who doesn't know about my sibling) mocks everything involved with nonconforming gender identity. I don't know how to handle this.
>
> My political beliefs are different from those of most of the people on campus. I wish it was possible to have good discussions—that's what college is supposed to be about, right? But I've been ridiculed and shamed the few times I've tried to share my thoughts. I'd like to have political discussions if I thought there was a chance I wouldn't get mocked.

Dilemmas like these hint at the potential for tough conversations. Do you keep quiet and pay the price in feeling disconnected and resentful? Or do you take the plunge and risk frustration and hard feelings?

Beyond personal matters, social issues can be a huge source of dispute. Hot-button topics like abortion, climate change, immigration, and gun control can stoke arguments. The understanding gap is perhaps widest when it comes to politics: Only

2 percent of U.S. voters—regardless of party affiliation—say that those who voted for the opposing presidential candidate understand them "very well" (Dunn et al., 2020). Republicans and Democrats alike say it's stressful to talk politics with people who disagree (Van Green, 2021). These feelings have led to avoidance: Almost half of Americans have stopped talking politics with someone (Jurkowitz & Mitchell, 2020). Majorities of voters from both major political parties say they have few or no close friends who support the other candidate (Dunn, 2020). And almost one in five survey respondents report that politics has hurt their friendships or family relationships (Homans & McFadden, 2022).

A course on interpersonal communication isn't the place to discuss how society wound up so angry and polarized: That's best left to historians and sociologists. And this certainly isn't the place to hash out what beliefs are right and wrong. But it *is* the place to analyze what happens when disagreements arise, and how to communicate in ways that can lead to better understanding and more civil relationships.

Biological Roots of Incivility

What turns a civil conversation into an angry shouting match or refusal to talk? Part of the answer lies in the human genome. Mistrusting the "other" seems to be hardwired into our DNA (Hobfoll, 2018). In this sense, modern humans are as tribal as our ancestors:

> … it is quite correct to see tribalism as primitive, but not in the sense we use the term, where we see others as primitive and ourselves as advanced… our tribal impulses are not far under the surface. (Hobfoll, 2021)

Once the "other" is perceived as a threat, the body goes into attack mode, driven by the amygdala, an almond-shaped structure buried deep within the brain. One physician called this organ the brain's "smoke detector" because it prepares the body for danger (van der Kolk, 2014). Once triggered by a perceived threat, the amygdala goes into overdrive, triggering production of stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, readying the body for fight or flight. Heart rate increases, raising blood pressure, and breathing becomes more rapid.

From an evolutionary perspective, this reaction has survival value. But in the face of disagreement, the response leads to an uncivil reaction that has aptly been called "amygdala hijacking:"

> The active amygdala also immediately shuts down the neural pathway to our prefrontal cortex so we can become disoriented in a heated conversation. Complex decision-making disappears, as does our access to multiple perspectives. As our attention narrows, we find ourselves trapped in the one perspective that makes us feel the most safe: "I'm right and you're wrong." (Hamilton, 2015)

Neural hijacking is especially intense when people are faced with evidence that goes against positions that are a fundamental part of their identity (Kaplan et al., 2016). Recall the result when you've tried to persuade people with strongly held beliefs that are different from yours. Besides threatening the relationship, you probably didn't change the other person's mind. In fact, your counterarguments—no matter how strong—were likely to have a boomerang effect, strengthening the very beliefs you were challenging (Tsipursky, 2022).

Dialogue, Not Debate

How can you handle profound differences in the face of such strong, reflexive resistance? By now you should recognize that pushing back rarely works. Another approach is to disparage the other person or give up trying to connect. But when the relationship matters, there's another approach: To try dialogue instead of debate (Angel, 2016).

As Table 13.2 explains, debate focuses on arguing and winning—trying to persuade others that you're right and they're wrong. By contrast, dialogue is about open-minded discussion aimed at increased understanding. Sarah Stewart Holland and Beth Silvers (2019) capture this attitude nicely in the title of their book, *I Think You're Wrong (But I'm Listening)*. The authors are two people from opposite ends of the political spectrum who believe that politics don't have to divide. Instead, they have maintained a close friendship through respectful dialogue.

TABLE 13.2 Debate Versus Dialogue in Conversations

	Debate	Dialogue
Goal	Winning: Getting your opponent to acknowledge that you're right. (This rarely happens.)	Learning new information and perspectives. (Not necessarily persuading the other person.) Increasing the chance you will be heard. (Possibly) coming up with better ideas through collaboration.
Mindset	There's one right answer, i.e., your position. People who disagree with you are wrong. Dismissal and disrespect for the other party's point of view as misinformed, ignorant, naive, etc. Commitment to defending your position against counter arguments. "Never give an inch."	Contrasting points of view are likely—sometimes inevitable. Goodwill towards the other person. Curiosity about the other's point of view: "What shaped your beliefs and feelings?" Willingness to modify your position when some of your partner's input makes sense.
Strategy	Listen to discover weaknesses in the opposing position. Marshal evidence to demonstrate the strengths of your position and flaws in the other's position.	Temporarily suspend judgment while you consider the other's perspective. Ask for more information to clarify the other's

	Debate	Dialogue
	Craft and push a narrative that reinforces your position.	position. Acknowledge new perspectives when they make sense to you. Invite the other person to consider your point of view (without necessarily agreeing).
Likely outcomes	Other's position may become more entrenched. Your original point of view is reinforced, not modified. Less regard for opponent and their position. Little desire to continue relationship with your opponent.	Satisfaction at having a good discussion instead of an argument. Greater understanding of other points of view. Possibly modify original position(s). Learn more about yourself. Potential for future engagement.

Dialogue may not resolve differences, but it can preserve and even enhance relationships. Before engaging in a difficult conversation—especially with people who matter to you—it may be useful to think—and perhaps even say—"I'm here to understand, not argue."

Daryl Davis offers a radical example of fostering dialogue under the most difficult circumstances. As an African American person, he has faced discrimination his whole life—so much that, when he was a

child, he wondered, “How can you hate me if you don’t even know me?” (Kristof, 2021). As an adult, Davis sought answers to that question by meeting one-on-one with local leaders of the Ku Klux Klan, a terrorist hate group that has committed violence against Black people. In some cases, those conversations were truly transformative (see Watch and Discuss 13.2). Davis summarizes the communication approach that enabled him to transform even such extreme hate: “What we do too much of is, we talk *about* each other, we talk *at* each other, or we talk *past* each other. I have found that talking *with* each other is much more effective.”

Watch and Discuss 13.2: “What Do You Do When Someone Just Doesn’t Like You?”

[*Please note*: You must be using an online, browser-based eReader in order to view this content.]

1. Describe how Daryl Davis created a *supportive* and *civil communication climate* in his conversations.
2. What principles could you use from this video in your own difficult conversations?

Davis’s behavior in the face of hate is a dramatic example of **civility**—claiming and caring for your own identity, needs, and beliefs

without degrading the other person. The Institute for Civility in Government explains:

> Civility is about more than just politeness, although politeness is a necessary first step. It is about disagreeing without disrespect, seeking common ground as a starting point for dialogue about differences, listening past one's preconceptions, and teaching others to do the same.

You might question Davis's willingness to engage with members of a group that has advocated and engaged in hate crimes. Nonetheless, his ability to remain civil in standing against racism is exceptional.

Guidelines for Civil Dialogue

Two-time world debating champion Bo Seo (2022) suggests that the problem of polarization isn't so much that we disagree but rather that we disagree badly.

Unlike the conflicts described in Chapter 12, the primary goal of civil dialogue isn't to solve a problem. Rather, it's to talk about differing opinions and beliefs in ways that preserve the relationship and increase mutual understanding. It can be a relief to realize that you don't need to persuade the other person: It's sufficient to make yourself understood and get a clearer idea of where your conversational partner is coming from. Here are guidelines for doing so:

- *Choose the time and place*. If you see an argument coming, consider letting the other person know your intentions rather than springing the conversation on them:

> "I'd like to hear why you feel so strongly about that. Is this a good time?
>
> "The last time we talked politics, it ended badly. Would you be willing to meet for coffee and give it another shot?"

Holiday meals and work-related functions are two of many problematic occasions for tackling tough topics. As one observer put it, "No one is going to change their mind because of an argument at the dinner table" (Cummings, 2017).

- *Listen more and talk less.* Paradoxically, the best way to change minds is to listen before promoting your position. Toward this end it's wise to follow the Biblical injunction to "be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger."
- *Ask for clarification.* Try to better understand the other person's position. Use the skills of questioning and paraphrasing described in Sections 8.4.2 and 8.4.3:

  > "Why do you think this problem has gotten so bad?"
  >
  > "Let me see if I get your point. When it comes to church and state, you're more concerned with state interference than church interference. Is that accurate?"

- *Find common ground.* If you look, you might be surprised to discover areas of agreement. Find ways to genuinely say, "You're right" and "I agree." For instance:

  > "You're right: Gun violence has gotten out of hand."
  >
  > "I agree: There's no excuse for violence in protests."

- *Acknowledge and empathize with both thoughts and emotions.* Remember that you can acknowledge the other's position without agreeing with it (Section 8.4.4):

"I see what you're getting at."

"Thanks for explaining how it looks to you."

It's also important to acknowledge the speaker's emotions, which probably are at least as important as their thoughts (Section 9.3). Remember, you can validate feelings without having to agree with the ideas that caused them.

"Wow, you really feel angry about this."

"You're worried about where the country is headed."

- *Keep a civil tone.* Read this sentence in a snide tone of voice: "You're saying there's NO problem with abortion on demand?" and you'll realize that *how* you say something is as important as what you say (Section 7.4.3).
- *Stick to specifics.* Avoid broad labels and slogans:

  "The president is a fool"

  "This country can't absorb every immigrant with a hard-luck story."

  Instead, try to drill down on the abstraction ladder (Section 6.2.5) and seek facts or opinions behind the other's position:

  "What has the president done that you disagree with?"

  "What kind of refugees should we take, and who shouldn't be let in?"

- *Talk about your communication.* Section 10.3.1 describes how metacommunication can be a discussion tool. It's often helpful to step back and analyze how you're communicating:

  "I'm having a tough time with that label. Could you use a different word?"

  "I notice we're raising our voices. How about we take a deep breath and try lowering the volume?"

- *Take responsibility*.Section 6.3.2 describes how "I" language signals ownership of your thoughts and feelings. It's far more productive to say, "I don't see it that way" than "That's a ridiculous idea." It can also be constructive to apologize for things you've said and done: "I'll admit I once said that, and I'm sincerely sorry for the hurt it caused."
- *Consider the whole person*. Try to remember that there's more to your conversational partner than their position on the issue under discussion. Consider other qualities they might possess—loyal friend, hard worker, good family member, and so on. It's harder to demonize the "other" when you think of them as a whole person.
- *Ask if the other person is interested in your thoughts*. After you've done your best to understand the other person, you would hope that they will be as interested in learning your position. If they don't express curiosity, you might consider asking, "Now that we've talked about what you believe, would you like to hear what I think?" Their reaction might help you decide whether to pursue the conversation any further.
- *Take a time out*. If the conversation becomes overheated, calm things down by proposing a break.

    "This isn't getting us anywhere. How about talking again after dinner?"

    "For now, let's agree to disagree."

See Activity 4 at the end of the chapter for a self-appraisal about following these guidelines.

Civility Is a Struggle

Knowing *how* to communicate civilly doesn't mean it's easy—especially when your character, intelligence, or strongly held views are called into question. The challenge is to summon what Abraham Lincoln called the "better angels of our nature" by communicating constructively even when it's the most difficult. This is especially important if the relationship matters to you.

Using the skills outlined above goes against hardwired instincts to respond aggressively and defensively. So don't expect perfection as you strive to communicate civilly. And realize there's no guarantee that your bid for dialogue will be welcomed.

It can make sense to give up if you've tried your best by communicating in the ways described here and still find that constructive conversations don't happen. In other cases, you may find the other person's views so offensive that (unlike Daryl Davis) you don't want to have anything to do with them. Even then, you can adopt the pledge new physicians take to "Do no harm"—to your self-respect, your reputation, and your conversational partner.

If you can keep your cool in the face of controversy, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you behaved civilly. That's no small matter. And if there's a meeting of the minds, however small, you can consider that a victory.

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Objective 13.1 **Explain the nature of communication climates.**

Communication climate refers to the social tone of a relationship. The most influential factor in shaping a communication climate is the degree to which the people involved see themselves as valued. Messages have differing levels of confirmation, which we can categorize as confirming, disagreeing, or disconfirming.

Q: Using weather terminology, how would you describe the communication climate in one of your important relationships?

Objective 13.2 **Describe how communication climates develop.**

Confirming messages, which communicate "you exist and are valued," may involve endorsement or acknowledgment; at minimum, they involve recognition. Disagreeing messages, which communicate "you are wrong," use argumentativeness and complaining. Disconfirming messages, which communicate "you do not exist and are not valued," include aggressiveness

and ostracism. Face-threatening acts lead to defensiveness, the process of protecting our presenting self.

Q: Identify representative confirming, disagreeing, and/or disconfirming messages that create and maintain the climate you identified in Objective 13.1.

Objective 13.3 **Distinguish the factors that create defensive versus supportive communication climates.**

Jack Gibb suggested a variety of ways to create a positive and nondefensive communication climate. These include being descriptive rather than evaluative, problem oriented rather than controlling, spontaneous rather than strategic, empathic rather than neutral, equal rather than superior, and provisional rather than certain.

Q: Recall an incident in which both you and the other communicator became defensive. Which parts of your face needs were you and the other person protecting? Which of Gibb's categories triggered defensive responses?

Objective 13.4 **Demonstrate ways to engage in casual conversations and civil dialogues.**

Casual conversations can be difficult to start and maintain. The best approach is to focus less on yourself and more on the other person. Ask open questions, reciprocate, and keep your

responses brief and interesting when responding. When conversations become challenging due to emotion-provoking topics, remain civil. Focus on hearing out the other person rather than debating. Find common ground, acknowledging and empathizing when possible. Attend to metacommunication and share your thoughts without evaluating the other person.

Q: Identify situations when you are conversationally challenged and describe how you could improve your communication skill in these contexts.

ACTIVITIES

1. **Ethical Challenge:** The "Disregard" segment of Section 13.2.1 describes the phenomenon of *phubbing*. While snubbing others by being on your phone can be disconfirming, sometimes it's inevitable when your phone is your connection to work, family, and other important relationships. What is your ethical obligation to your in-person communication partners? Are there times when phubbing is justified? How can the confirming messages of *recognition* and *acknowledgment* (also in Section 13.2.1) offset the disconfirmation of phubbing?
2. **Reflection:** A study cited in the "Ostracism" segment of Section 13.2.1 suggests that employees would rather receive negative attention from bosses and coworkers than no attention at all. Reflect on your workplace experiences and decide if you've been hurt more by poor treatment or the silent treatment. (For more on this study and topic, look up the YouTube video "Why Ostracism Can Be Like Death in the Workplace.")
3. **Build Your Skill:** The "Your Turn" segment of Section 13.4.1 describes how to tell good stories in conversation. The example in that segment is a

response to the question, "Tell me about the first concert you attended." Now "Take Your Turn" and answer that question. Write out a response story that follows these guidelines:

- Keep it focused
- Keep it short
- Keep it interesting
- Keep it appropriate

Tell your concert story to a classmate or friend and get their feedback.

4. **Self-Appraisal**: Consider an unsatisfactory argument you've had with a friend or loved one on a challenging topic. Now review the "Guidelines for Civil Dialogue" at the end of Section 13.4.2 and assess how well you did or didn't perform each of them. For instance, did you try to *find common ground*? Did you *keep a civil tone*? Identify the three guidelines you most need to work on in pursuit of civil dialogue.

Assessing Your Communication: Confirming and Disconfirming Communication (Personal Practice)

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LIST OF KEY TERMS

- acknowledgment
- aggressiveness
- argumentativeness
- certainty
- civility
- communication climate
- complaining
- confirming communication
- Controlling communication
- Description
- disagreeing message
- disconfirming communication
- disregard
- empathy
- endorsement
- equality
- evaluation

face-threatening acts

neutrality

Ostracism

Phubbing

problem orientation

provisionalism

recognition

spontaneity

strategy

superiority

CHAPTER 13 Flashcards

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Glossary

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

Abstraction ladder A range of more-abstract to less-abstract terms describing an event or object.

Accommodation A lose-win conflict style in which one person defers to the other.

Achievement culture A culture that places a high value on the achievement of material success and a focus on the task at hand.

Acknowledgment A type of confirming message that communicates paying close attention to the ideas and feelings of others.

Advising (response) A listening response in which the receiver offers suggestions about how the speaker should deal with a

problem.

Aggressiveness Verbal attacks that demean others' self-concept and inflict psychological pain.

Ambiguous language Language consisting of words and phrases that have more than one commonly accepted definition.

Analytical listening A style of listening that emphasizes hearing all details of a message and then assessing it from a variety of perspectives.

Analyzing (response) A listening response in which the listener offers an interpretation of a speaker's message.

Argumentativeness Presenting and defending positions on issues while attacking positions taken by others.

Assertiveness Clearly and directly expressing one's thoughts, feelings, and wants to another person.

Asynchronous communication Communication that occurs when there is a time gap between when a message is sent and when it is received.

Attending A phase of the listening process in which the communicator focuses on a message, excluding other messages.

Attribution The process of attaching meaning to another person's behavior.

Avoidance A lose-lose conflict style in which people nonassertively ignore or stay away from conflict.

Avoiding A relational stage immediately prior to terminating in which the partners minimize contact with each other.

Benevolent lie A lie that is not considered malicious by the person who tells it.

Bonding A stage of relational development in which the partners make symbolic public gestures to show that their relationship exists.

Boundaries Limits that a family sets on its members' actions and interactions, such as what topics are permissible to discuss, how to discuss certain topics, and with whom family members may interact outside the family.

"But" statement A statement in which the second half cancels the meaning of the first; for example, "I'd like to help you, *but* I have to go or I'll miss my bus."

Certainty Dogmatically stating or implying that one's position is correct and others' ideas are not worth considering; likely to arouse defensiveness, according to Gibb.

Channel The medium through which a message passes from sender to receiver.

Chronemics The study of how people use and structure time.

Circumscribing A relational stage in which partners begin to reduce the scope of their contact and commitment to each other.

Civility Claiming and caring for your own identity, needs, and beliefs without degrading the other person.

Closed questions Questions that limit the range of possible responses, such as questions that seek a yes-or-no answer.

Co-cultural theory A theory focusing on how culture and power affect communication. Non-dominant groups use a variety of communication strategies including assimilation, accommodation, and separation.

Co-culture A group within an encompassing culture with a perceived identity.

Code-switching The practice of adapting one's manner of speaking when changing cultural or co-cultural contexts.

Cognitive complexity The ability to construct a variety of frameworks for viewing an issue.

Collaboration A win-win conflict style in which both people get what they want.

Collectivistic culture A culture whose members feel loyalties and obligations to an in-group, such as an extended family, a community, and even a work organization.

Communication The use of messages to generate meanings.

Communication climate The emotional tone of a relationship between two or more individuals.

Communication competence The ability to achieve one's goals in a manner that is, ideally, both effective and appropriate.

Comparison level (CL) The minimum standard of what behavior is acceptable from a relationship partner.

Comparison level of alternatives (CLalt) A comparison between the rewards one is receiving in a present situation and those one could expect to receive in others.

Competition A win-lose conflict style in which one person wins at the other person's expense.

Complaining A disagreeing message that directly or indirectly communicates dissatisfaction with another person.

Complementary conflict A conflict situation in which the partners use different but mutually reinforcing behaviors.

Compromise A conflict style in which both people get only part of what they want because they sacrifice some of their goals.

Confirmation bias The tendency to seek out and organize data that supports already existing opinions.

Confirming communication A message that expresses caring or respect for another person; the person is valued by the speaker.

Conflict An expressed struggle between at least two interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other person in achieving their goals.

Conflict ritual Repeating pattern of interlocking conflict behaviors.

Conformity orientation The degree to which family communication stresses uniformity of attitudes, values, and beliefs.

Connection–autonomy dialectic The tension between the need for integration and the need for independence in a relationship.

Contempt Communication that demeans and belittles another person. One of Gottman's "Four Horsemen."

Content dimension The dimension of a message that communicates information about the subject being discussed. *See* Relational dimension.

Controlling communication According to Gibb, messages that attempt to impose some sort of outcome on another person, resulting in a defensive response.

Conventionality–uniqueness dialectic The tension between the need to behave in ways that conform to others' expectations and the need to assert one's individuality by behaving in ways that violate others' expectations.

Convergence The process of adapting one's speech style to match that of others with whom one wants to identify. *See also* Divergence.

Conversation orientation The degree to which families favor an open climate of discussion on a wide array of topics.

Counterfeit questions Questions that are disguised attempts to send a message rather than elicit information.

Critical listening A listening style that involves evaluating the content of a message.

Criticism Attacks on another person's character. One of Gottman's "Four Horsemen."

Culture The language, values, beliefs, traditions, and customs people share and learn.

Debilitative emotions Emotions of high intensity and long duration that prevent a person from functioning effectively.

De-escalatory spiral A reciprocal communication pattern in which one person's nonthreatening behavior leads to reduced hostility by the other, with the level of hostility steadily decreasing. *Opposite of* Escalatory spiral.

Defensiveness The attempt to protect a presenting image that a person believes is being attacked. One of Gottman's "Four Horsemen."

Description Messages that describe a speaker's position without evaluating others.

Dialectical tensions Relational tensions that arise when two opposing or incompatible forces exist simultaneously.

Differentiating A relational stage in which the partners reestablish their individual identities after having bonded.

Direct aggression An expression of the sender's thoughts and/or feelings that attacks the position and dignity of the receiver.

Disagreeing message A message that essentially communicates to another person, "You are wrong," and includes argumentativeness and complaining.

Disconfirming communication A message that expresses a lack of caring or respect for another person; the person is not valued by the speaker.

Disinhibition Expressing messages without considering the consequences of doing so; occurs more frequently in online communication.

Disregard A type of disconfirming communication in which another person's message is treated as unimportant or nonexistent.

Divergence Speaking in a way that emphasizes difference from others. *See also* Convergence.

Emblems Deliberate nonverbal behaviors with precise meanings, known to virtually all members of a cultural group.

Emotional contagion The process by which emotions are transferred from one person to another.

Emotional intelligence The ability to understand and manage one's own emotions and to be sensitive to others' feelings.

Emotional labor Managing and even suppressing emotions when it is both appropriate and necessary to do so.

Empathizing (response) A listening response that conveys identification with a speaker's perceptions and emotions.

Empathy The ability to project oneself into another person's point of view in an attempt to experience the other's thoughts and feelings. Also, a type of supportive communication described by Gibb.

Endorsement A type of confirming message that communicates agreement with and support for another person.

Environment Both the physical setting in which communication occurs and the personal perspectives of the people involved.

Equality A type of supportive communication described by Gibb, which suggests that the sender regards the receiver with respect.

Equivocation A statement that is not false but cleverly avoids an unpleasant truth.

Escalatory spiral A reciprocal communication pattern in which one person's attack leads to a counterattack by the other, with the level of hostility steadily increasing. *Opposite of* De-escalatory spiral.

Ethnicity A person's identification with a social group on the basis of common national or cultural traditions.

Ethnocentrism An attitude that one's own culture is superior to that of others.

Euphemism A pleasant term substituted for a blunt one to soften the impact of unpleasant information.

Evaluating (response) A listening response that appraises a sender's thoughts or behaviors and implies that the person evaluating is qualified to pass judgment on the other.

Evaluation A message in which a sender judges a receiver in some way, usually resulting in a defensive response.

Evaluative language Language that conveys the sender's attitude, feelings, or judgment rather than simply offering an objective description.

Expectancy violation An instance when others don't behave as we assume they should.

Experimenting An early stage in relational development, consisting of a search for common ground. If the experimentation is successful, the relationship progresses to intensifying. If not, it may go no further.

Expression–privacy dialectic The tension between the desire to be open and disclosing and the desire to be closed and private.

Face The image an individual wants to project to the world. *See also* Presenting self.

Face-threatening acts Behavior by another that is perceived as attacking an individual's presenting image, or face.

Facework Actions people take to preserve their own and others' presenting images.

Facilitative emotions Emotions that contribute to effective functioning.

Fallacy of approval The irrational belief that it is vital to win the approval of virtually every person with whom a communicator interacts.

Fallacy of catastrophic expectations The irrational belief that the worst possible outcome will probably occur.

Fallacy of causation The irrational belief that emotions are caused by others and not by the person who has them.

Fallacy of helplessness The irrational belief that satisfaction in life is determined by forces beyond one's control.

Fallacy of overgeneralization Irrational beliefs in which (1) conclusions (usually negative) are based on limited evidence, or (2) communicators exaggerate their shortcomings.

Fallacy of perfection The irrational belief that a worthwhile communicator should be able to handle every situation with

complete confidence and skill.

Fallacy of should The irrational belief that people should behave in the most desirable way, based on the inability to distinguish between what *is* and what *should be*.

Family A system with two or more interdependent people who have a common past history and a present reality and who expect to influence each other in the future.

Family communication patterns Typical interaction processes in a family, identified by these categories: consensual, pluralistic, protective, or laissez-faire. *See also* Conversation orientation; Conformity orientation.

Feedback A discernable response of a receiver to a sender's message.

Friendship A voluntary interpersonal relationship that provides social support.

Fundamental attribution error The tendency to give more weight to personal qualities than to the situation when making attributions.

Gender A social, symbolic construction involving dimensions of masculinity and femininity

Halo effect The tendency to form an overall positive impression of a person on the basis of one positive characteristic. *See also* Horns effect.

Haptics The study of touch in human communication.

Hearing The first stage in the listening process in which sound waves are received by a communicator.

High-context culture A culture that relies heavily on subtle, often nonverbal cues to maintain social harmony.

Horns effect The tendency to form an overall negative impression of a person on the basis of one negative characteristic. *See also* Halo effect.

Hyperpersonal communication An acceleration of the discussion of personal topics and relational development; occurs more frequently in online communication.

"I" language Language that uses first-person singular pronouns to identify the source of the message and to take responsibility. *See also* "You" language.

Impression management The communication strategies people use to influence how others view them.

Inclusion–seclusion dialectic The tension between a couple's desire for involvement with the "outside world" and their desire to live their own lives, free of what can feel like interference from others.

Individualistic culture A culture in which people view their primary responsibility as helping themselves personally rather than looking out for the needs of the larger group.

In-group A group with which an individual identifies.

Initiating The first stage in relational development in which the interactants express interest in one another.

Integrating A relational stage in which the interactants begin to take on a single identity.

Integration–separation dialectic The tension between the desire for connection with others and the desire for independence.

Intensifying A relational stage following experimenting in which the interactants move toward integration by increasing their amount of contact and the breadth and depth of their self-disclosure.

Intercultural communication Communication that occurs when members of two or more cultures or other groups exchange messages in a manner that is influenced by their different cultural perceptions and symbol systems.

Interpersonal communication In contrast to *impersonal* communication, the interpersonal variety is distinguished by the qualities of uniqueness, interdependence, self-disclosure, and intrinsic rewards.

Interpretation The process of attaching meaning to sense data.

Intersectionality The notion that culture is multidimensional, and therefore no single label can fully explain an individual's identity and group memberships.

Intimate distance One of Hall's four distance zones, ranging from skin contact to 18 inches.

"It" statements A statement in which "it" replaces the personal pronoun "I," making the statement less direct and more evasive.

Johari Window A model that describes the relationship between self-disclosure and self-awareness.

Kinesics The study of body movements.

Leanness A description of messages that carry less information due to a lack of nonverbal cues. *See also* Richness.

Lie A deliberate attempt to hide or misrepresent the truth.

Linguistic relativity The notion that the language individuals use exerts a strong influence on their perceptions.

Listening The process of receiving and responding to others' messages.

Listening fidelity The degree of congruence between what a listener understands and what the message-sender was attempting to communicate.

Love languages Methods of expressing affection to a romantic partner, such as words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, acts of service, and physical touch.

Low-context culture A culture that primarily uses language (rather than nonverbal cues) to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas

as clearly and directly as possible.

Masspersonal communication Interaction that crosses boundaries between mass and interpersonal contexts.

Mediated communication Any type of communication occurring via a technological channel.

Metacommunication Messages (usually relational) that refer to other messages; communication about communication.

Microaggressions Messages that communicate disrespect and disdain through brief verbal or nonverbal displays.

Mindful listening Careful and thoughtful attention and responses to others' messages.

Mindless listening Reacting to others' messages automatically and routinely, without much mental involvement.

Monochronic An approach to the management of time that emphasizes punctuality, schedules, and completing one task at a time.

Multimodality The ability and willingness to use multiple channels of communication.

Narratives The stories we use to describe our personal worlds.

Negotiation The fourth stage of the perception process, in which communicators influence each other's perception through interaction.

Neutrality A defense-arousing behavior described by Gibb in which the sender expresses indifference toward a receiver.

Noise External, physiological, and psychological distractions that interfere with the accurate transmission and reception of a message.

Nonverbal communication Messages expressed by nonlinguistic means.

Nonverbal immediacy The display of involvement signaled by physical closeness, eye contact, movement, and touch.

Nurturing culture A culture that regards the support of relationships as an especially important goal.

Oculesics The study of how the eyes can communicate.

Openness–closedness dialectic The tension between the desire to be honest and open and the desire for privacy.

Open questions Questions that allow for a variety of extended responses.

Organization The stage in the perception process that involves arranging data in a meaningful way to make sense of the world.

Ostracism Intentionally excluding others from social interaction.

Out-group A group that an individual sees as different from herself or himself.

Paralanguage Nonlinguistic means of vocal expression, for example, rate, pitch, and tone.

Paraphrasing Restating a speaker's thoughts and feelings in the listener's own words.

Passive aggression An indirect expression of aggression, delivered in a way that allows the sender to maintain a facade of kindness.

Perceived self The person we believe ourselves to be in moments of candor. It may be identical to or different from the presenting and desired selves.

Perception checking A three-part method for verifying the accuracy of interpretations, including a description of the sense data, two possible interpretations, and a request for confirmation of the interpretations.

Personal distance One of Hall's four distance zones, ranging from 18 inches to 4 feet.

Personal space The distance we put between ourselves and others.

Phonological rules Rules governing the way in which sounds are pronounced in a language.

Phubbing The act of snubbing others (intentionally or not) while attending to your phone.

Politeness Communicating in ways that save face for both senders and receivers.

Polychronic An approach to the management of time that emphasizes flexibility of schedules and pursuing multiple tasks at the same time.

Power distance The degree to which members of a society accept an unequal distribution of power among members.

Powerful language Direct and forceful word choices, with declarations and assertions.

Powerless language Forms of speech that communicate to others a lack of power in the speaker: hedges, hesitations, intensifiers, and so on.

Pragmatic rules Rules that govern interpretation of language in terms of its social context. *See also* Semantic rules; Syntactic rules.

Predictability–novelty dialectic Within a relationship, the tension between the need for a predictable relational partner and one who is more spontaneous and less predictable.

Prejudice An unfairly biased and intolerant attitude toward others who belong to an out-group.

Presenting self The image a person presents to others. It may be identical to or different from the perceived and desired selves.

Primacy effect The tendency to pay more attention to, and to better recall, things that happen first in a sequence.

Privacy management The choices people make to reveal or conceal information about themselves.

Problem orientation A supportive style of communication described by Gibb in which the communicators focus on working together to solve their problems instead of trying to impose their own solutions on one another.

Provisionalism A supportive style of communication described by Gibb in which a sender expresses open-mindedness to others' ideas and opinions.

Proxemics The study of how communication is affected by the use, organization, and perception of space and distance.

Public distance One of Hall's four distance zones, extending outward from 12 feet.

Punctuation The process of determining the causal order of events in a series of interactions.

Questioning (response) A listening response in which the receiver seeks additional information from the sender.

Race A social construction that categorizes people by physical traits, cultural traits, and ancestry.

Racist language Language that classifies members of one racial group as superior and others as inferior.

Reappraisal Rethinking the meaning of emotionally charged events in ways that alter their emotional impact.

Recognition A type of confirming message that communicates awareness of another person.

Reference groups Groups against which we compare ourselves, thereby influencing our self-concept and self-esteem.

Reflected appraisal A mirroring of the judgments of other people; part of how the self-concept develops.

Regulators Nonverbal cues that help control verbal interaction.

Relational commitment A promise, explicit or implied, to remain in a relationship and to make that relationship successful.

Relational dimension The dimension of a message that expresses the social relationship between two or more individuals. *See* Content dimension.

Relational listening A listening style that is primarily concerned with emotionally connecting with others.

Relational maintenance Communication aimed at keeping relationships operating smoothly and satisfactorily.

Relational transgression A violation of the explicit or implicit terms of a relationship, letting the partner down in some important way.

Relative language Words that gain their meaning by comparison.

Remembering A phase of the listening process in which a message is recalled.

Responding A phase of the listening process in which feedback occurs, offering evidence that the message has been received.

Revelation–concealment dialectic The tension between a couple's desire to be open and honest with the "outside world" and their desire to keep things to themselves.

Richness The quantity of nonverbal cues that accompany spoken messages. *See also* Leanness.

Rumination Recurrent thoughts not demanded by the immediate environment that increase an emotion's duration.

Salience The significance attached to a particular person or phenomenon.

Sapir–Whorf hypothesis The best-known declaration of linguistic relativism, based on the work of Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir.

Selection A phase of the perception process in which a communicator attends to a stimulus from the environment.

Self-concept The relatively stable set of perceptions each individual holds of herself or himself. *See also* Self-esteem.

Self-disclosure The process of deliberately revealing information about oneself that is significant and that would not normally be

known by others.

Self-esteem Evaluations of self-worth; how one feels about one's self-concept. *See* Self-concept.

Self-fulfilling prophecy The causal relationship that occurs when a person's expectations of an event and her or his subsequent behavior based on those expectations make the outcome more likely to occur than would otherwise have been true.

Self-monitoring The process of attending to one's behavior and using these observations to shape the way one behaves.

Self-serving bias The tendency to judge oneself in the most generous terms possible while being more critical of others.

Self-talk The nonvocal, internal monologue that is our process of thinking.

Semantic rules Rules that govern the meaning of language, as opposed to its structure. *See* Syntactic rules; Pragmatic rules.

Serial argument Repetitive conflicts about the same issue.

Sexist language Words or phrases that demean, exclude, or needlessly highlight people based on their sex or gender.

Significant other A person whose opinion is important enough to affect one's self-concept strongly.

Silent listening Staying attentive and nonverbally responsive without offering verbal feedback.

Sincere questions Genuine attempts to elicit information from others.

Social comparison Evaluating oneself in terms of or by comparison to others.

Social distance One of Hall's four distance zones, ranging from 4 feet to 12 feet.

Social exchange theory An economic model of relational attraction that suggests that we seek out people who can give us rewards that are greater than or equal to the costs we encounter in dealing with them.

Social identity The part of the self-concept that is based on membership in groups.

Social media Websites and applications that enable individual users to network and share content.

Social penetration model A model that describes relationships in terms of their breadth and depth.

Social support Helping others during challenging times by providing emotional, informational, or instrumental resources.

Spontaneity A supportive communication behavior described by Gibb in which the sender expresses a message without any attempt to manipulate the receiver.

Stability–change dialectic The tension between the desire to keep a relationship predictable and stable and the desire for novelty and change.

Stagnating A relational stage characterized by declining enthusiasm and standardized forms of behavior.

Standpoint theory A body of scholarship that explores how one's position in a society shapes one's view of society in general and of specific individuals.

Stereotyping Exaggerated beliefs associated with a categorizing system.

Stonewalling Withdrawing from and shutting down interaction with another person. One of Gottman's "Four Horsemen."

Strategy A defense-arousing style of communication described by Gibb in which a sender tries to manipulate or deceive a receiver.

Superiority A defense-arousing style of communication described by Gibb in which the sender states or implies that the receiver is inferior.

Supporting (response) A listening response in which the receiver reveals her or his solidarity with the speaker's situation.

Symmetrical conflict A conflict situation in which the partners use the same tactics as each other.

Synchronous communication Communication that occurs in real time.

Syntactic rules Rules that govern the ways symbols can be arranged, as opposed to the meanings of those symbols. *See* Semantic rules; Pragmatic rules.

System A group, such as a family, whose members interact with one another to form a whole.

Task-oriented listening A listening style that is primarily concerned with efficiency.

Terminating The concluding state of a relationship, characterized by the acknowledgment of one or both partners that the relationship is over.

Territory A stationary area claimed by a person or animal.

Transactional communication The dynamic process in which communicators create meaning together through interaction.

Triangular theory of love The notion that love comprises three interacting components: intimacy, passion, and commitment.

Uncertainty avoidance The tendency of a culture's members to feel threatened by ambiguous situations, and how much they try to avoid them.

Understanding A stage in the listening process in which the receiver attaches meaning to a message.

“We” language The use of first-person-plural pronouns to include others, either appropriately or inappropriately. *See* “I” language; “You” language.

Weak ties Less-personal relationships typified by infrequent and often superficial communication. Although the term “weak” sounds negative, these ties can offer social capital and interpersonal rewards.

Win-win problem solving An approach to conflict resolution in which people work together to satisfy all their goals.

“You” language A statement that expresses or implies a judgment of the other person. *See* Evaluation; “I” language.

LIST OF KEY TERMS

Conformity orientation

Content dimension

Convergence

Conversation orientation

Divergence

Evaluation

Halo effect

Horns effect

"I" language

Leanness

Pragmatic rules

Presenting self

Relational dimension

Richness

Self-concept

Self-esteem

Semantic rules

Syntactic rules

“You” language

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Credits

Ronald B. Adler
Santa Barbara City College

Russell F. Proctor II
Northern Kentucky University

Mary Ann T. McHugh
Arizona State University

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1 Interpersonal Process

After spending a year alone in space, astronaut Scott Kelly described his biggest challenge: "I think the hardest part is being isolated in a physical sense from people on the ground that are important to you." ***How satisfied are you with the amount and quality of personal contact in your life? What would be the ideal amount of contact?*** Back to text

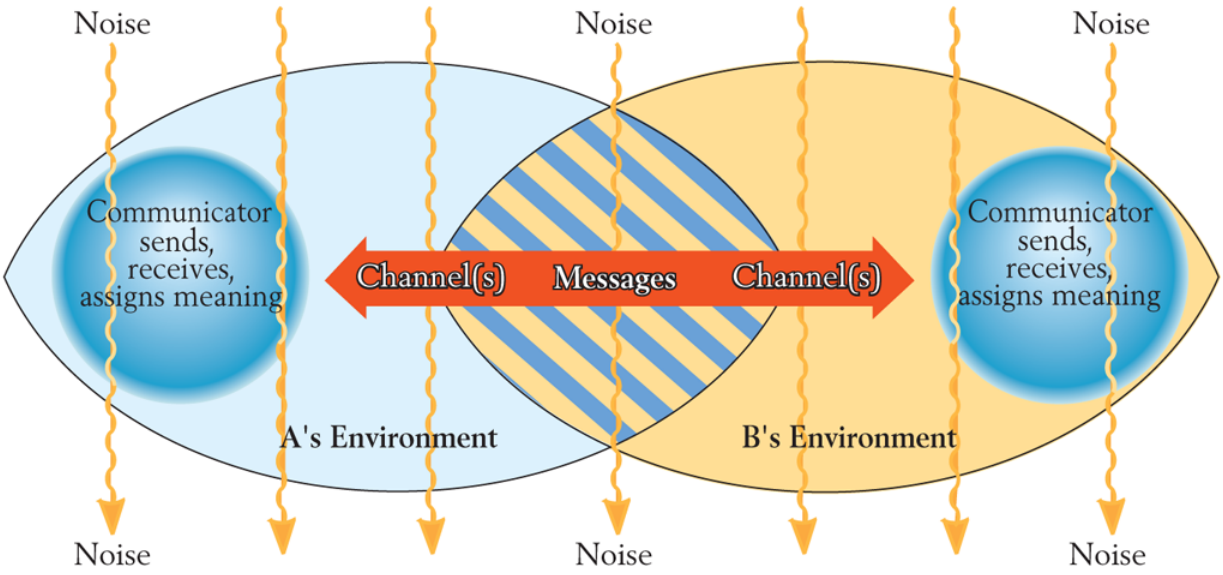


FIGURE 1.1 Transactional Communication Model Back to text

Highly Impersonal
(e.g., scheduling appointment, answering phone survey)
Highly Interpersonal
(e.g., marriage proposal, asking for forgiveness)

FIGURE 1.2 Impersonal–Interpersonal Communication Continuum Back to text

On the TV series *Hell's Kitchen*, chef Gordon Ramsay gets the job done—but often treats his staff poorly in the process. On *MasterChef Junior*, he is much more appropriate as a cooking coach while remaining effective. ***Is your communication generally both appropriate and effective? Why or why not?*** Back to text

2 Mediated Interpersonal Communication

NFL receiver A.J. Brown says, "Since I got off social media, I've been stress-free, enjoying my moment, my life, the things that matter to me instead of building stress from looking at things or looking at other people" (Pompei, 2022). ***How can taking breaks from social media be good for your mental health?*** Back to text

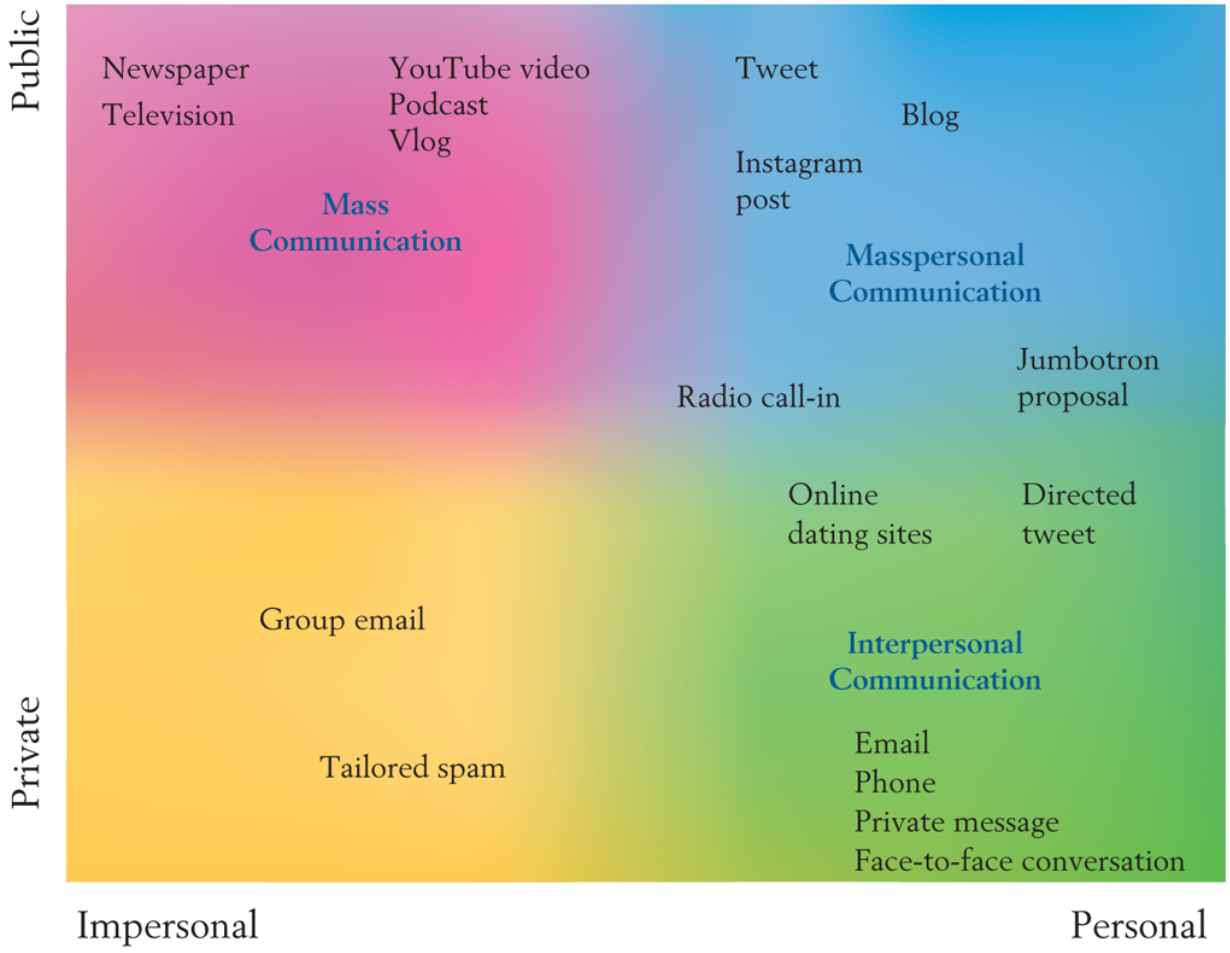


FIGURE 2.1 Examples of Mass, Mediated Interpersonal, and Masspersonal Communication Adapted from O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018 Back to text

Channel	Text	Voice	Audio-Visual	In-Person
Examples	Email, texting, letters, online posts	Phone calls, voice mail	Video conferencing, Zoom, FaceTime	Face-to-face interaction

Leaner → Richer

FIGURE 2.2 Leanness–Richness Spectrum of Communication Channels Back to text

Catfish: The TV Show spotlights people who fall in love through mediated channels. After meeting in person, some are unpleasantly surprised to discover extreme misrepresentation. The lean channels used by many catfishers make it easier to engage in hyperpersonal communication and relational intimacy. ***What steps can you take to avoid idealizing your online partners?*** Back to text

3 Culture and Interpersonal Communication

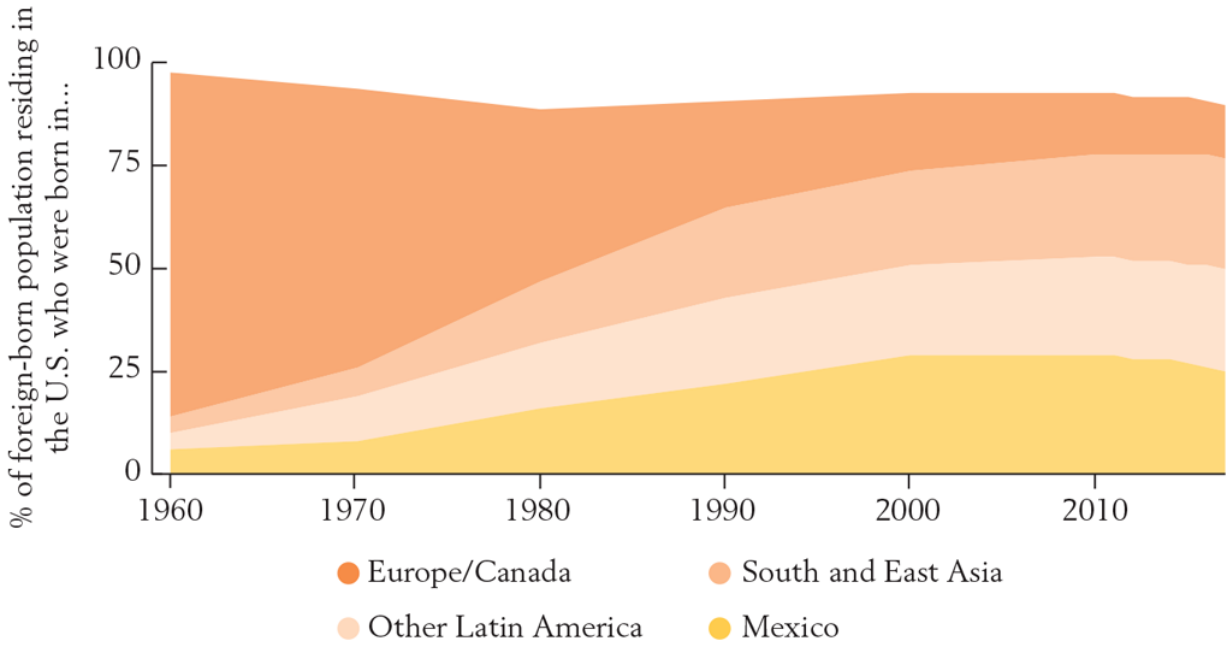


FIGURE 3.1 Origins of the U.S. immigrant population, 1960–2017 Data from Pew Research Center, 2019 Back to text

In the TV series *We Are Lady Parts*, an aspiring punk band's love of music unites diverse Muslim friends at the intersection of different racial, ethnic, educational, social, and even religious backgrounds. ***Which co-cultures are most salient to your identity? How do these groups influence your friendships?*** Back to text

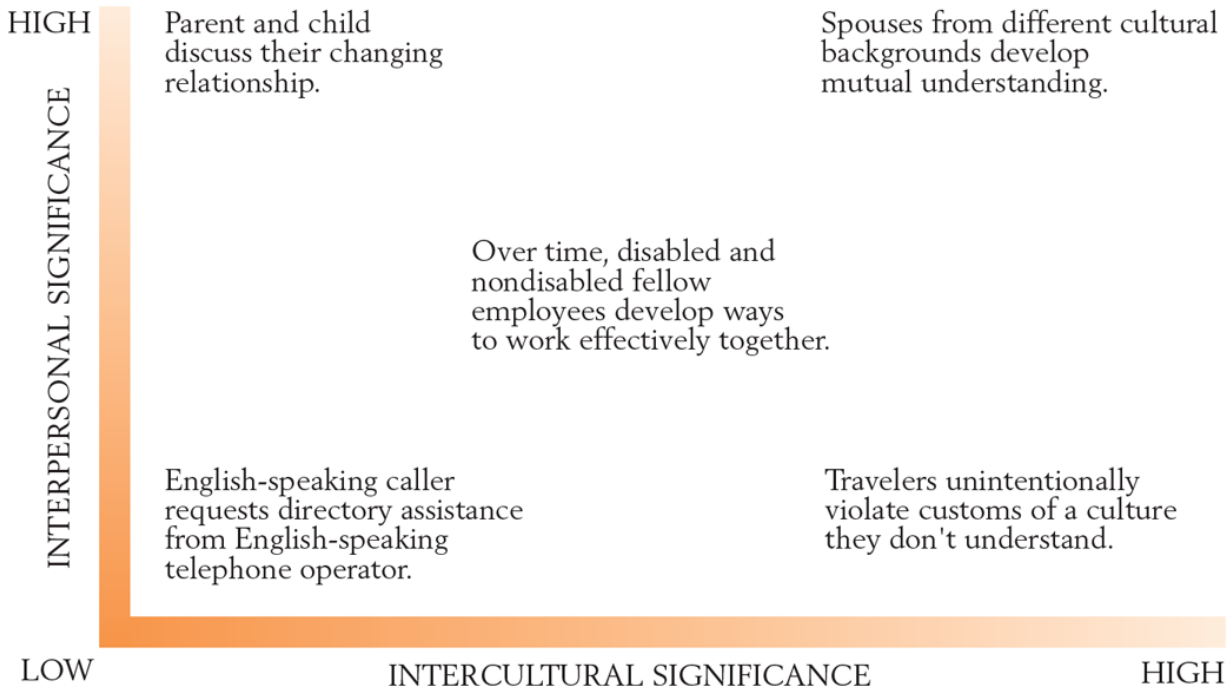

HIGH
INTERPERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE
LOW
Parent and child discuss their changing relationship.
Spouses from different cultural backgrounds develop mutual understanding.
Over time, disabled and nondisabled fellow employees develop ways to work effectively together.
English-speaking caller requests directory assistance from English-speaking telephone operator.
Travelers unintentionally violate customs of a culture they don't understand.
INTERCULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE
HIGH

FIGURE 3.2 Sample Interactions Between Interpersonal and Intercultural Dimensions of Communication Back to text

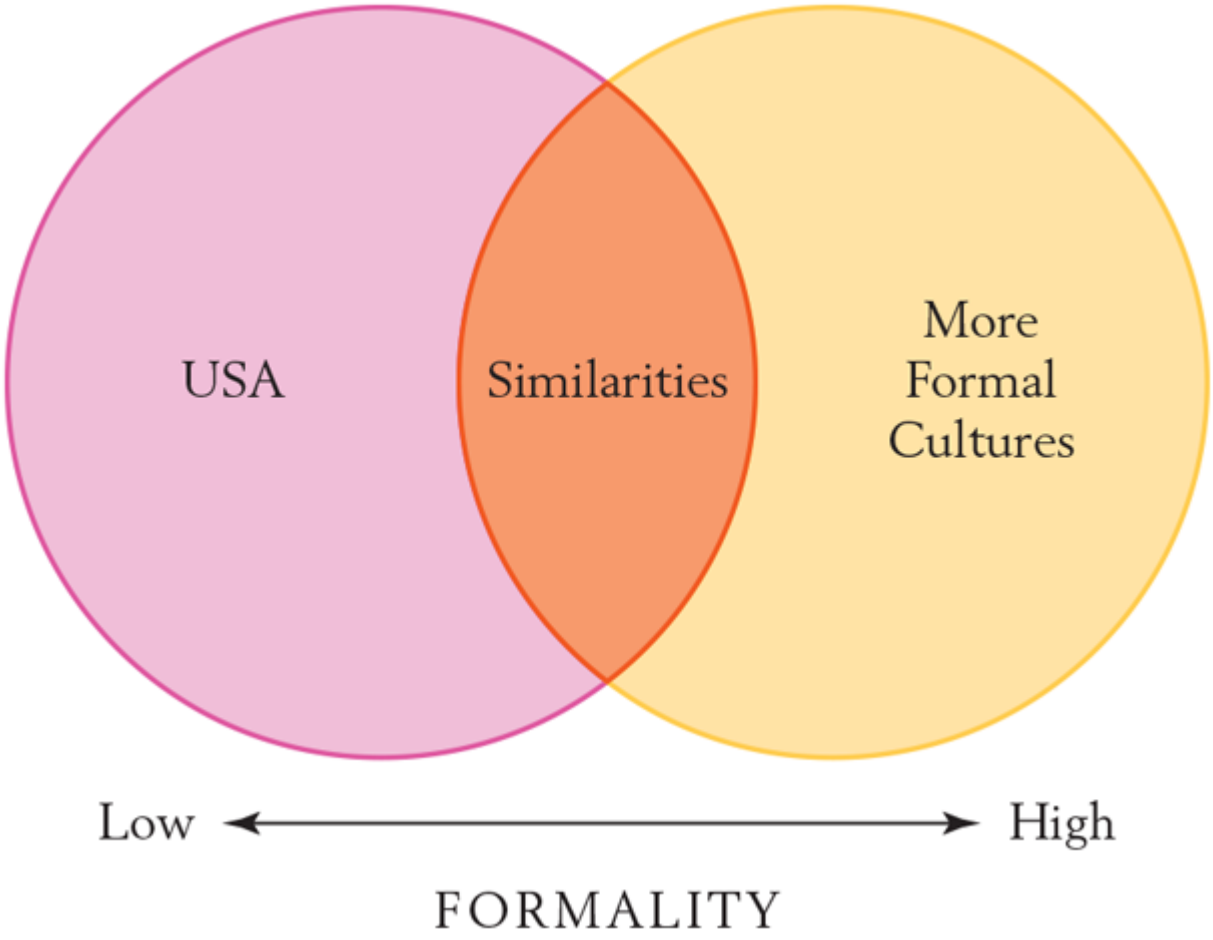


FIGURE 3.3 Intercultural Differences and Similarities in Formality Back to text

In the Korean streaming sensation *Squid Game*, characters such as Kang Sae-byeok (Hoyeon Jung) are so motivated by duty to family that they will risk death for the sake of that in-group. ***Which are your most important in-groups? How do you communicate your loyalty to them?*** Back to text

Actor Asia Kate Dillon identifies as nonbinary and genderfluid. When Dillon first discovered the term *nonbinary*, they said, "That's the word. There's actually a word for it"—and then cried (Masters, 2017). ***What terms best describe your gender identity? Do you feel a sense of community with those who use similar descriptors?*** Back to text

"It's not like I like it, but I feel like it's … part of me," says Billie Eilish of her Tourette syndrome. Still, she doesn't appreciate when those who are unaware of her condition laugh at her tics. ***Have you ever responded inappropriately to another person's disability? If so, what would be a better way to respond?*** Back to text

"When I'm here, I'm Starr Version 2," says Starr Carter (Amandla Stenberg), describing how she code-switches at her mostly white high school in the film *The Hate U Give*. She believes she'd be judged harshly if she talked and behaved at her school the way she does in her Black neighborhood. ***Do you ever engage in code-switching? If so, how do you feel about it?*** Back to text

4 Interpersonal Communication and the Self

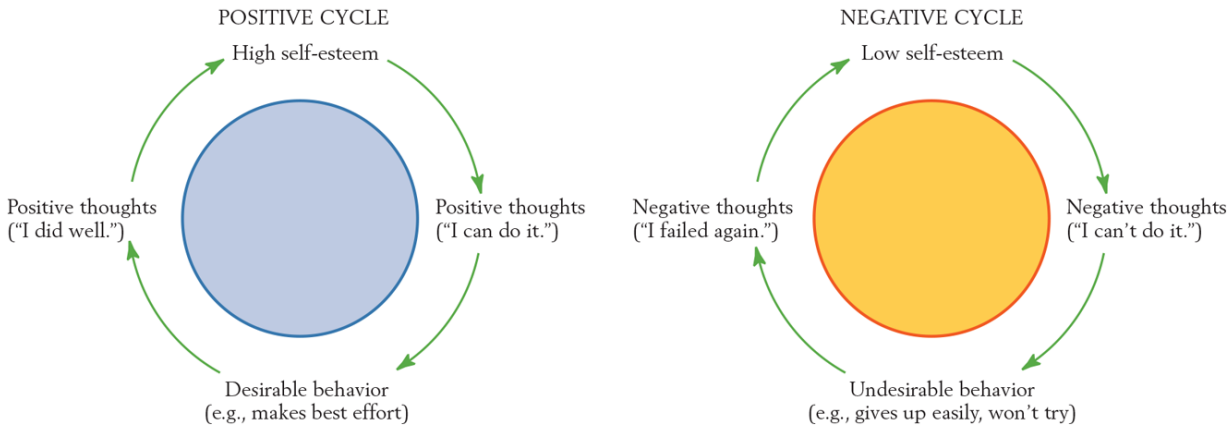


FIGURE 4.1 The Communication/Perception Feedback Loop Back to text

In the film *The Avengers: Endgame*, Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) finally embraces The Hulk as part of his multifaceted identity. He learns to choose which facets—such as Bruce's level-headedness and The Hulk's strength—to display in various contexts. But they're both "him."
Back to text

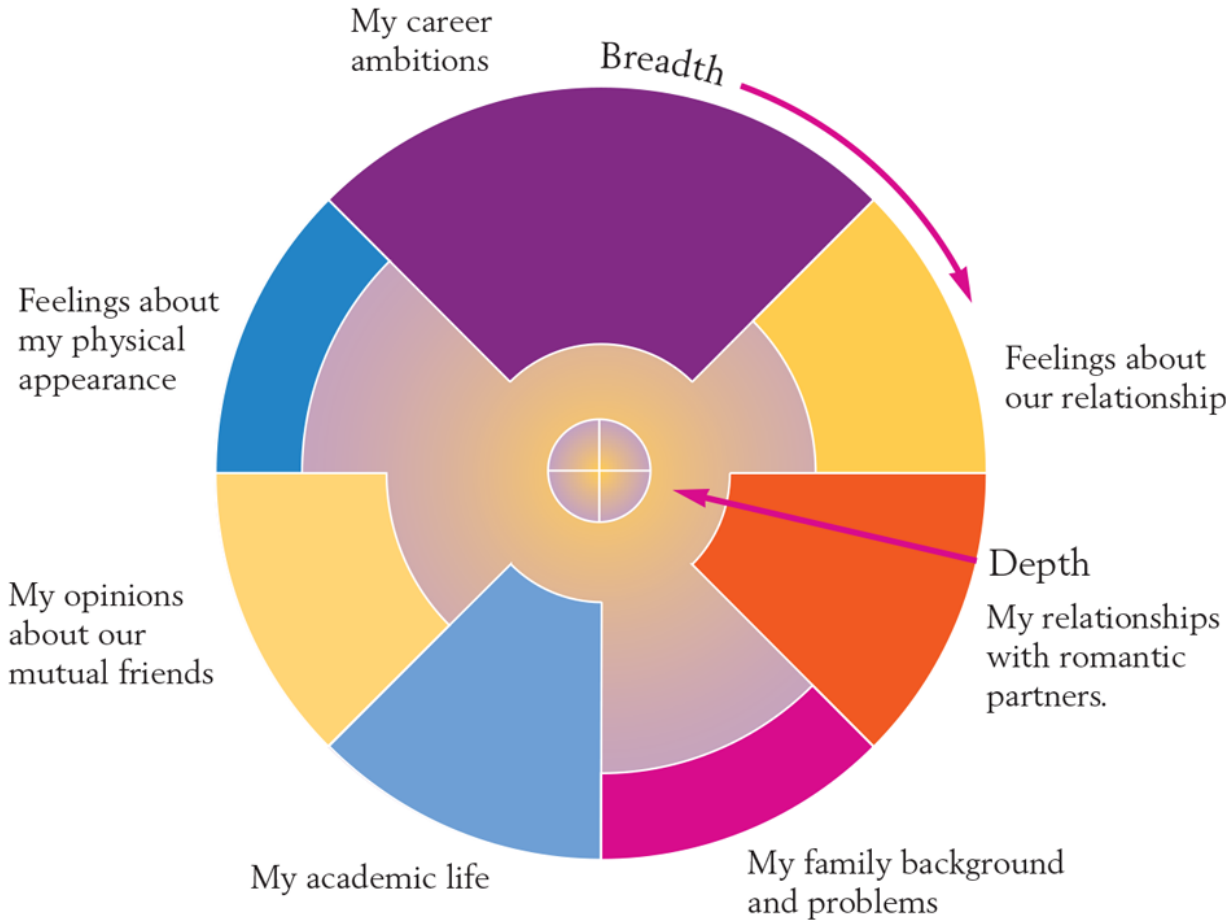


FIGURE 4.2 Sample Model of Social Penetration Back to text

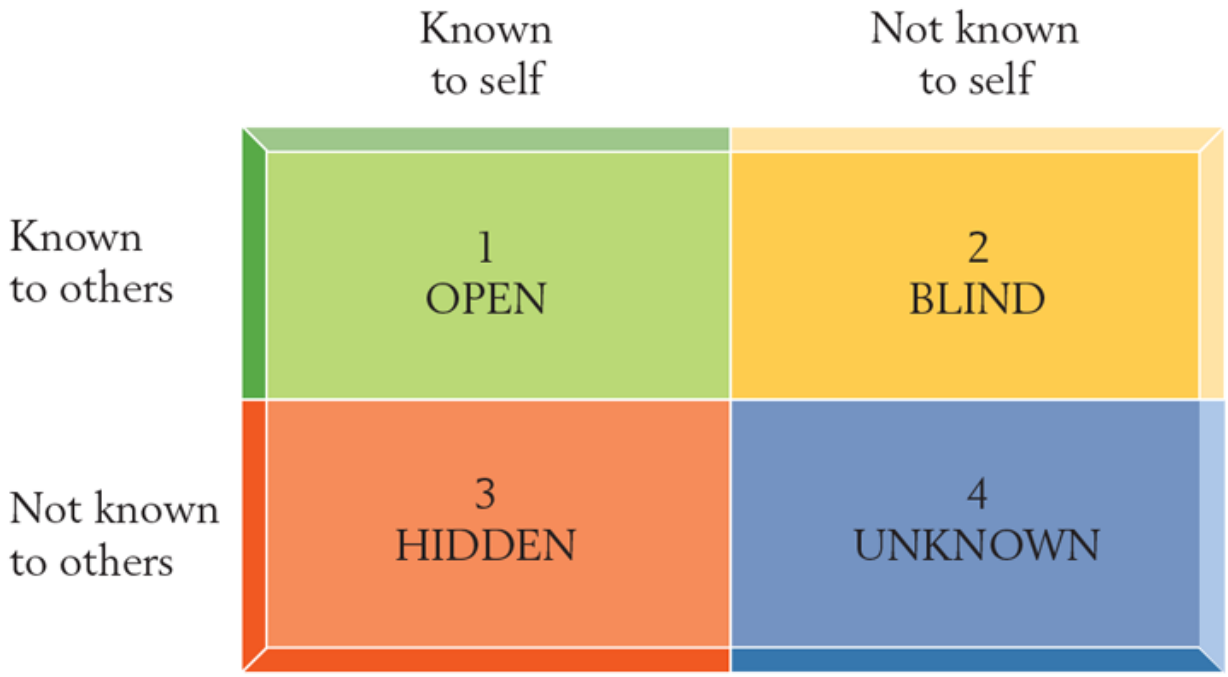


FIGURE 4.3 Johari Window Back to text

In the rom-com film *Can You Keep a Secret?*, Emma (Alexandra Daddario) spills her life secrets to a stranger named Jack (Tyler Hoechlin) when she thinks their plane is about to crash. (It doesn't.) She later learns that Jack is her company's new CEO, and he now knows way too much about her. ***Describe a time you've regretted self-disclosures you've made.*** Back to text

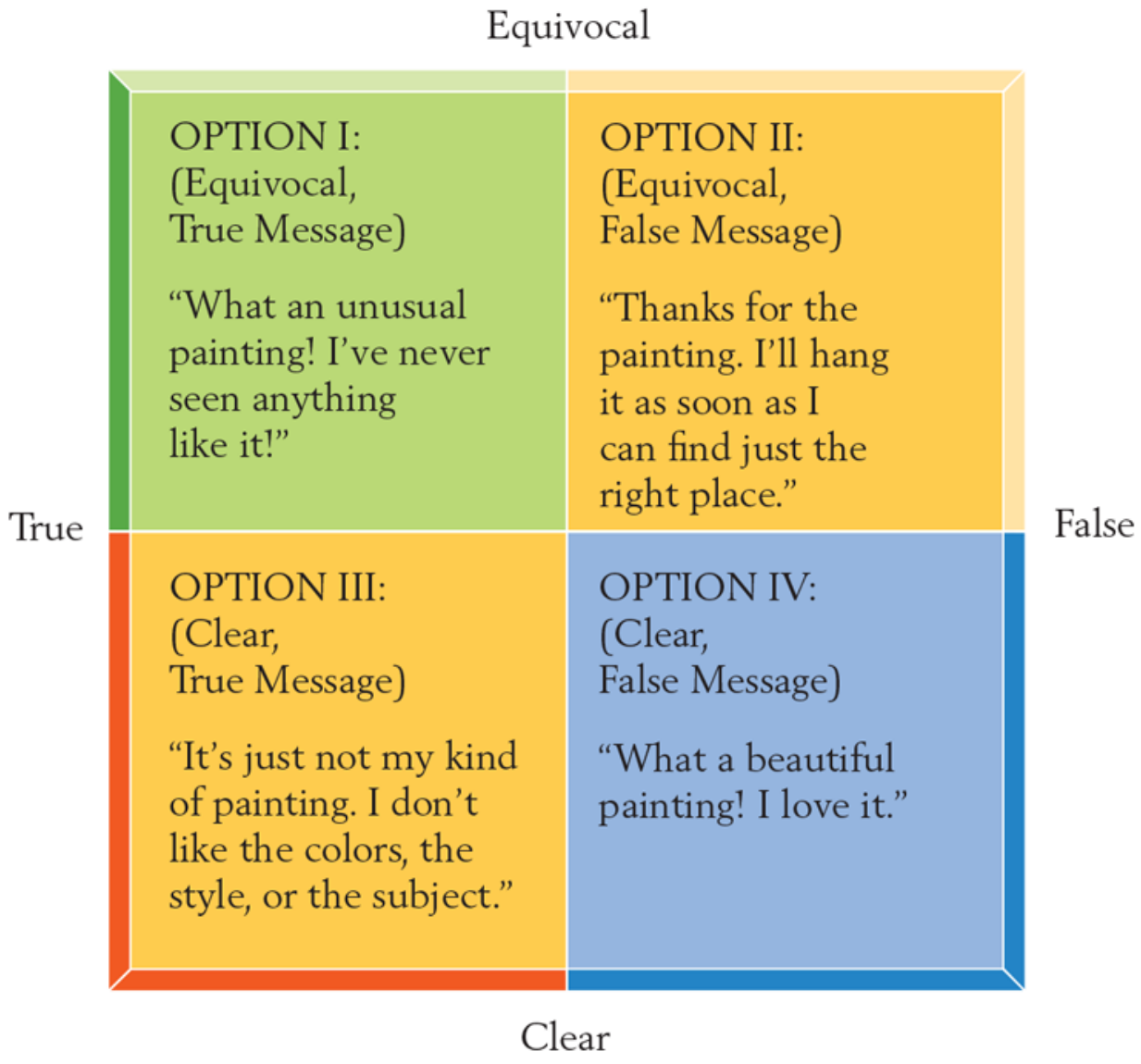


FIGURE 4.4 Dimensions of Truthfulness and Equivocation Back to text

5 Perceiving Others

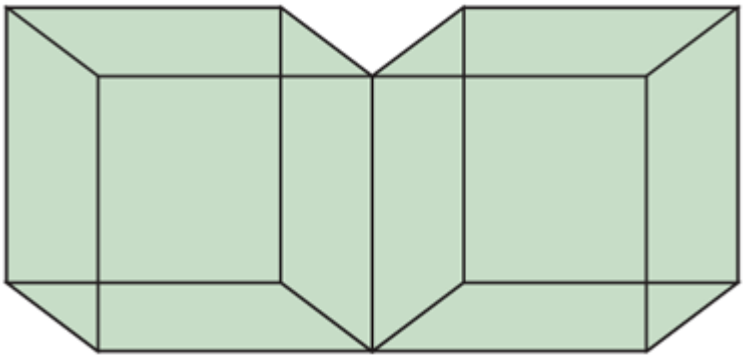


FIGURE 5.1 How Many Different Ways Can You View Two Cubes? Back to text

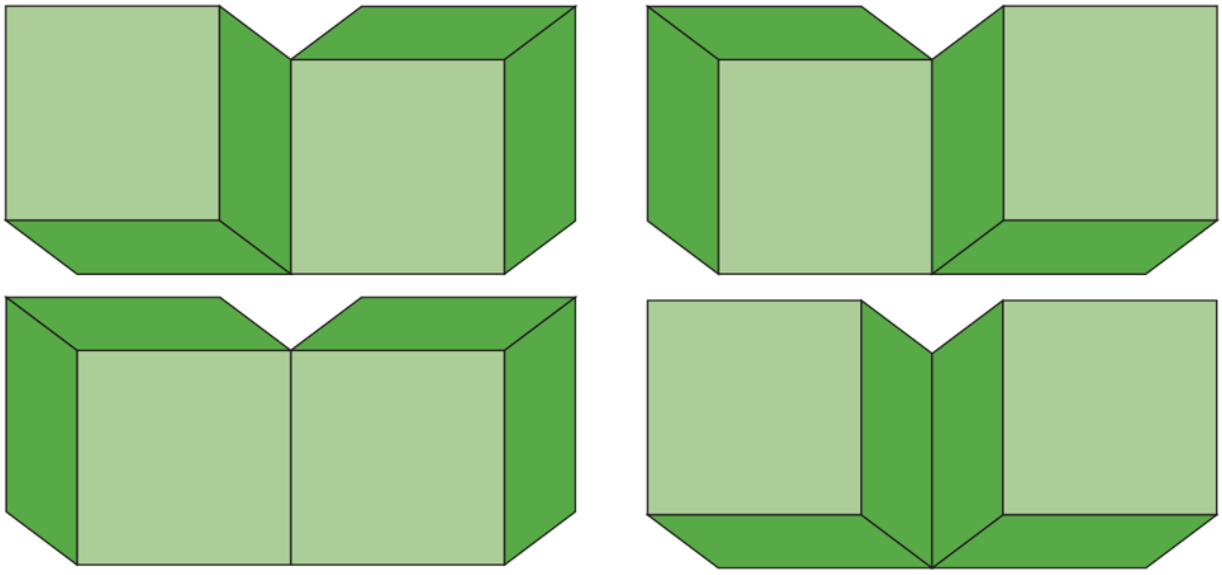


FIGURE 5.2 Four Ways of Viewing Figure 5.1. Back to text

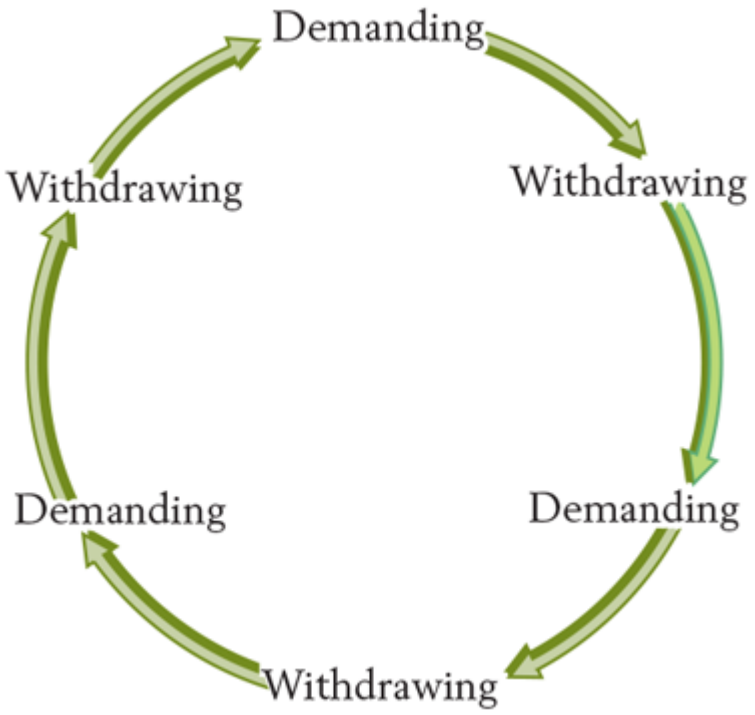


FIGURE 5.3 The Way a Communication Sequence Is Punctuated Affects Its Perceived Meaning. Which comes first, the demanding or the withdrawing? Back to text

"The same thing can happen but you see it in a different way," says Detective Danner (Tiffany Haddish) as she tries to solve a whodunnit in the TV series *The Afterparty*. The suspects all select, organize, and interpret recollections from their own unique perspectives. ***Describe a time when you and others told very different versions of the same event. How did you determine what "really" happened?*** Back to text

In the film *The King of Staten Island*, Scott Carlin (Pete Davidson) lacks the focus to finish high school, succeed as a tattoo artist, or publicly commit to his girlfriend. Crohn's disease and ADHD present health and neurobehavioral challenges that affect his perception and direction. ***How have physiological influences shaped your perspective and communication?*** Back to text

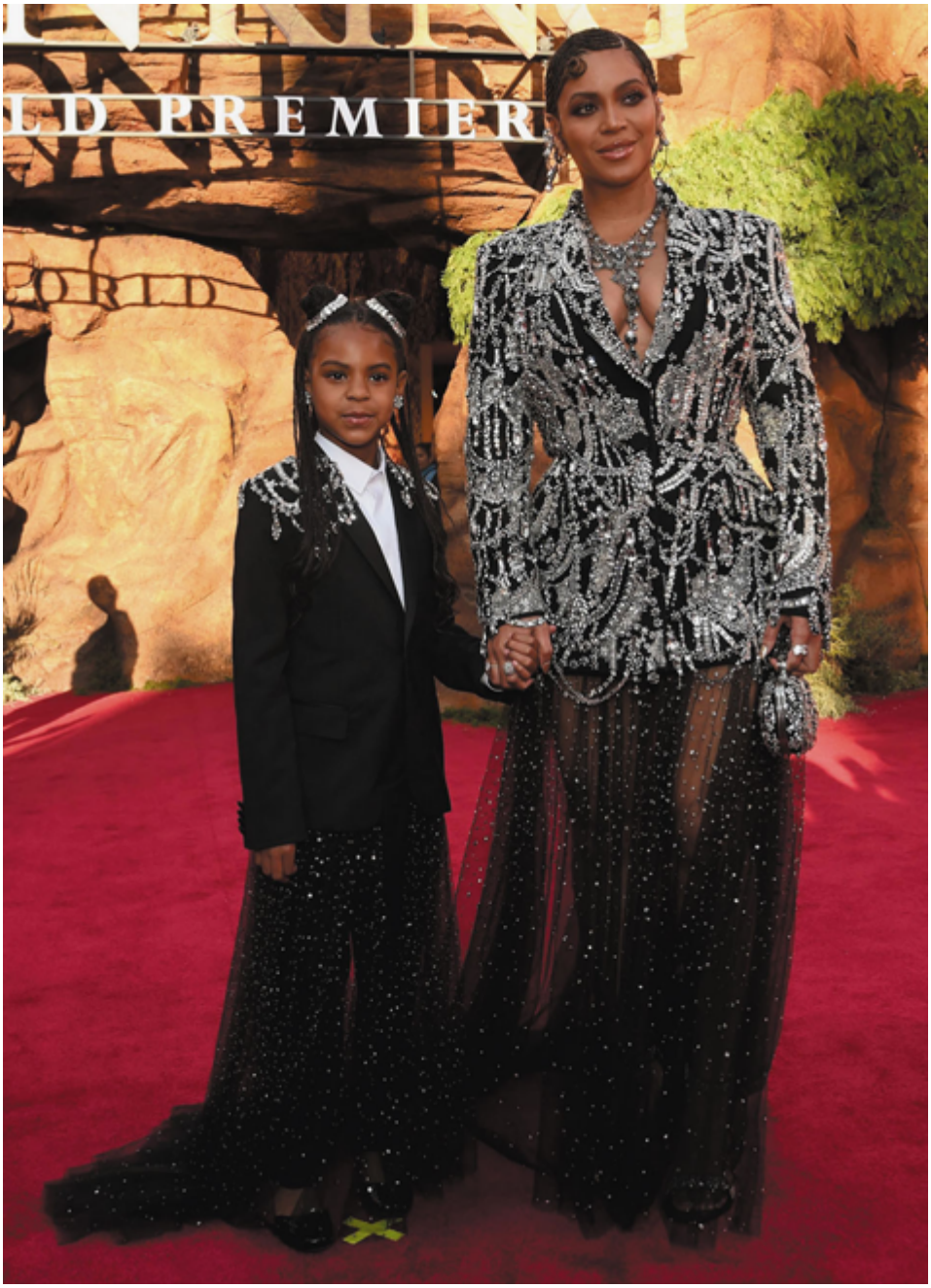
The film *The Stanford Prison Experiment* dramatizes a study by Dr. Philip Zimbardo described in this section. The experiment shows how adopting occupational roles can influence perception and behavior. ***How do your social roles shape your perceptions of others?*** Back to text

In the film *Tall Girl*, classmates overlook the other qualities of Jodi Kreyman (Ava Michelle) because "when you're a tall girl, it's the only thing people notice." At 6'1", Jodi is just as fixated on height: the primary feature she looks for in a romantic partner is tallness. ***How do physical characteristics affect your perception of yourself and others?*** Back to text

Responding with compassion even to villains who have wronged him in the past, Peter Parker (Tom Holland) in the film *No Way Home* exhibits empathy that makes him a superhero among superheroes. ***How can you develop empathy for those who have hurt you or with whom you fundamentally disagree?*** Back to text

6 Language

"God gave you a voice. Use it," Elizabeth Bonker told her fellow graduates. "And no, the irony of a nonspeaking autistic encouraging you to use your voice is not lost on me." (Chappell, 2022) Back to text



Beyoncé trademarked "Blue Ivy" to prevent others from using her firstborn's name for commercial profit. While the stakes are less lucrative for most people, baby naming is still an important decision that can shape identity throughout life. ***How has your name impacted your sense of self?*** Back to text

In the film *Moxie*, friends Vivian (Hadley Robinson) and Lucy (Alycia Pascual-Peña) decide to communicate less politely and more powerfully in response to harassment at their school. ***In general, do you think your language patterns need to be more powerful or more polite?*** Back to text

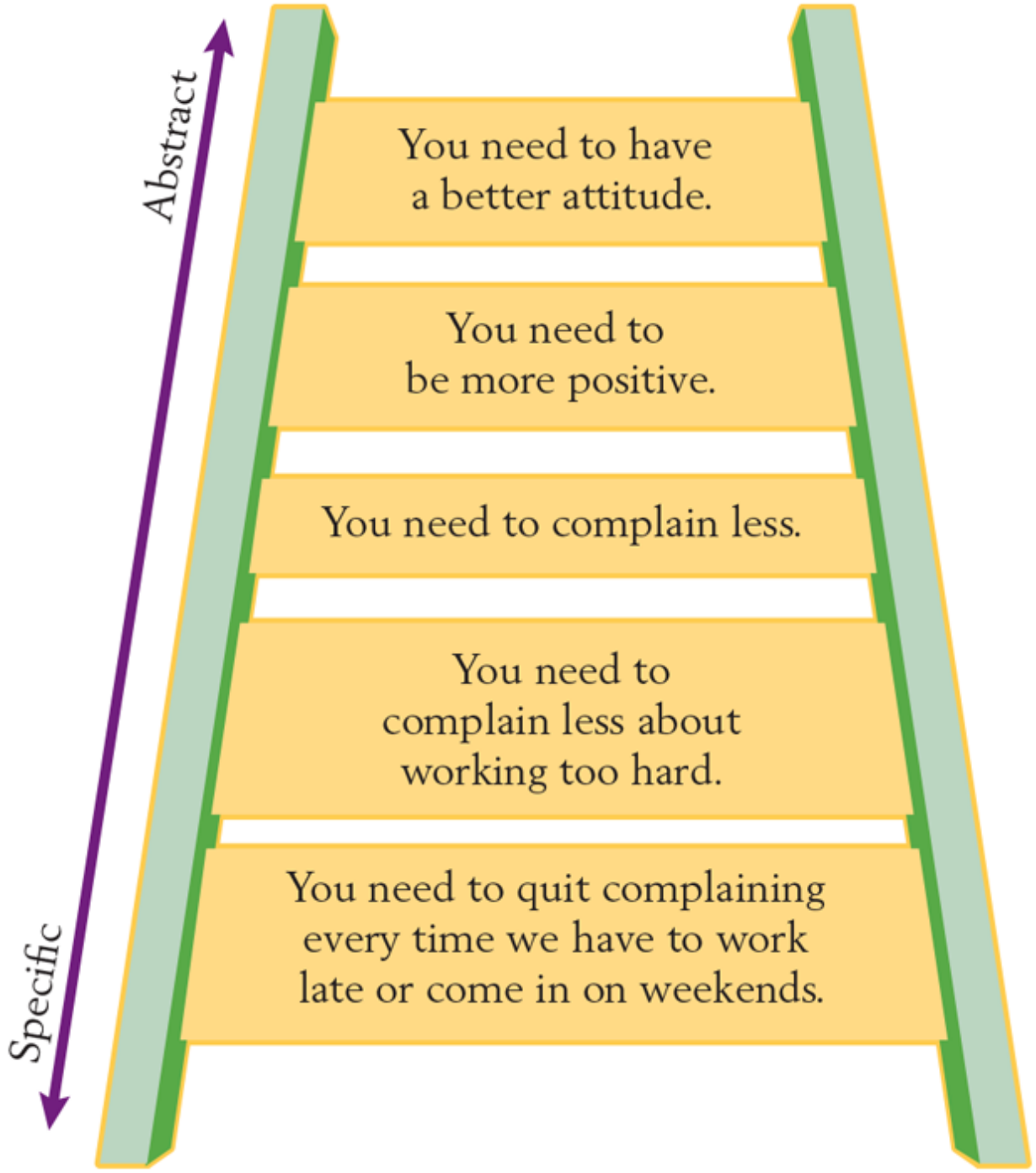

Abstract
Specific
You need to have a better attitude.
You need to be more positive.
You need to complain less.
You need to complain less about working too hard.
You need to quit complaining every time we have to work late or come in on weekends.

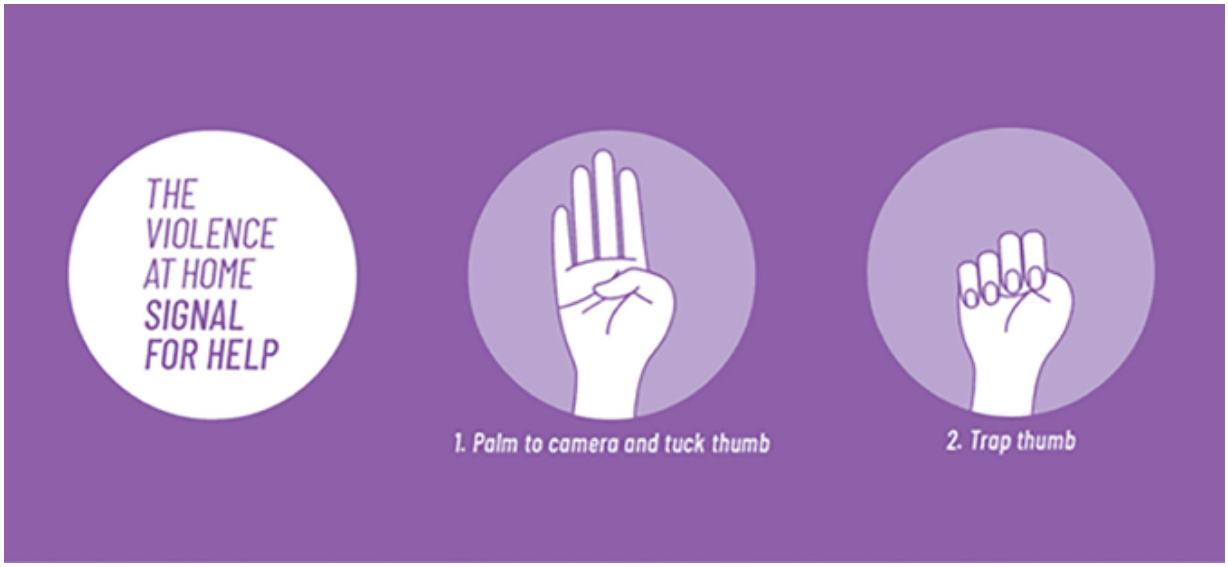
FIGURE 6.1 Abstraction Ladder. In this example, a boss gives feedback to an employee about career advancement at various levels of specificity. Back to text

World Champion skier Lindsey Vonn (2022) says she was often called "dramatic" about her injuries while a man might have been described as "resilient." She believes the labels influenced how she was perceived. ***Identify evaluative labels that have been used for you.*** Back to text

7 Nonverbal Communication

In the TV series *Abbott Elementary*, characters like Janine Teagues (Quinta Brunson) often reveal their attitudes toward others through knowing glances at the camera. ***How important is monitoring your nonverbal reactions to others? Provide examples of how this might vary with context.*** Back to text

In the TV series *The Dropout*, high-tech fraudster Elizabeth Holmes (played by Amanda Seyfried) manages impressions nonverbally by deepening her voice, sporting a signature black turtleneck like her idol, Steve Jobs, and purchasing a lavish property for Theranos headquarters. ***Describe an instance in which you managed impressions through your manner, appearance, or setting.*** Back to text



An abducted teenager was rescued after flashing this nonverbal distress signal to a passing car on a highway (Victor & Medina, 2021). The person who spotted the signal learned it from a TikTok video. ***Do you have gestures or other cues that you use with friends or family members to signal distress?*** Back to text

8 Listening: Receiving and Responding

FIGURE 8.1 The Chinese Characters that Make Up the Verb "to Listen." Back to text

Marty Byrde (Jason Bateman) must listen to others analytically and critically to keep his businesses—and himself—alive in the TV series *Ozark*. ***When do you need to have your critical antennae up in everyday conversations?*** Back to text

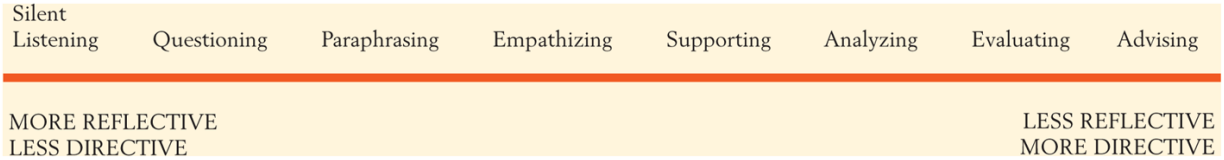


FIGURE 8.2 Types of Listening Responses Back to text

Open questions and reflective paraphrasing are tools of the trade for therapist Brooke Taylor (Uzo Aduba) in the TV series *In Treatment*. ***How can these skills help you become a better listener in your everyday encounters?*** Back to text

The title character in the TV series *Ted Lasso* (played by Jason Sudeikis) may not know much about British football, but he's a supportive listener who encourages teamwork and trust. ***Identify the most supportive listener you know and describe that person's listening traits.*** Back to text

9 Emotions

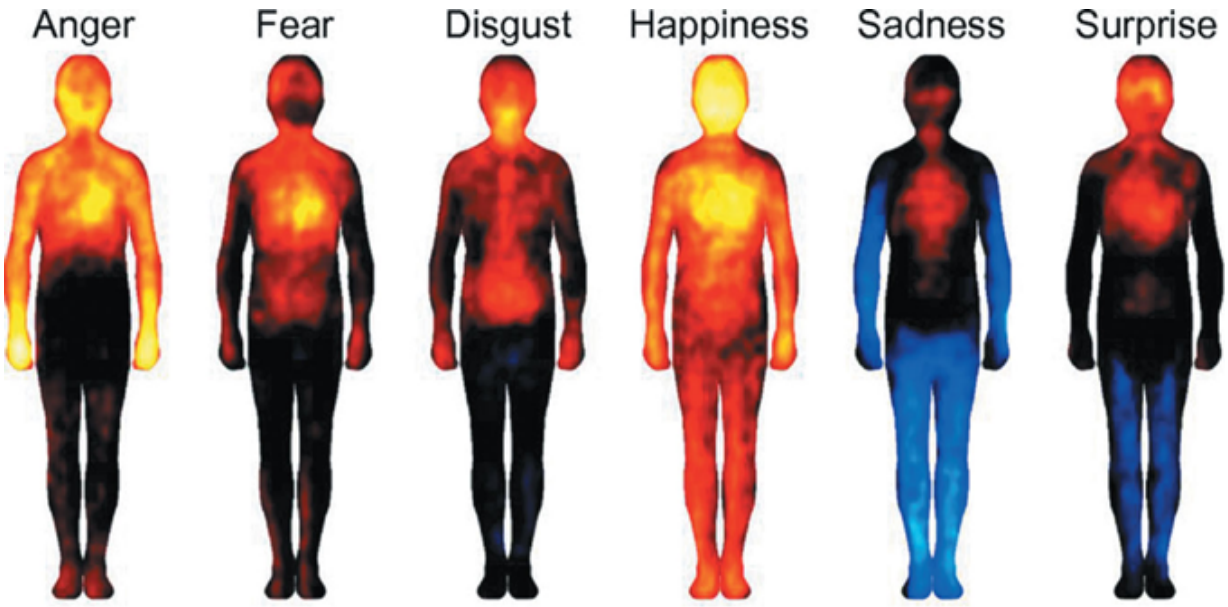


FIGURE 9.1 Physiological Changes from Emotions Back to text

FIGURE 9.2 Intensity of Emotions Back to text

FIGURE 9.3 Emotion Words Back to text

When Guy (Ryan Reynolds) in *Free Guy* discovers his "life" is actually a video game in which he is only a minor non-player character, he demonstrates both artificial and emotional intelligence to free himself from the fallacy of helplessness. ***How does changing your self-talk free and empower you?*** Back to text

In an inspiring tweet, Grand Slam champion Naomi Osaka vowed to celebrate herself and her achievements more. She encouraged her followers to do the same: "Your life is your own and you shouldn't value yourself on other people's standards." ***How do others' appraisals affect your self-talk?*** Back to text

10 Dynamics of Interpersonal Relationships

For more than 50 years, TV and film episodes of *Star Trek* have followed the adventures of the emotional James Kirk and his hyperrational first mate, Spock. Their complementary personalities contribute to a rich, satisfying relationship. ***In what ways are any of your close relationships enriched by complementarity?*** Back to text

Alone in a new country, Emily (Lily Collins, left) strikes up relationships with people in and near her apartment building in the TV series *Emily in Paris*. ***Which of your relationships were forged out of proximity?*** Back to text

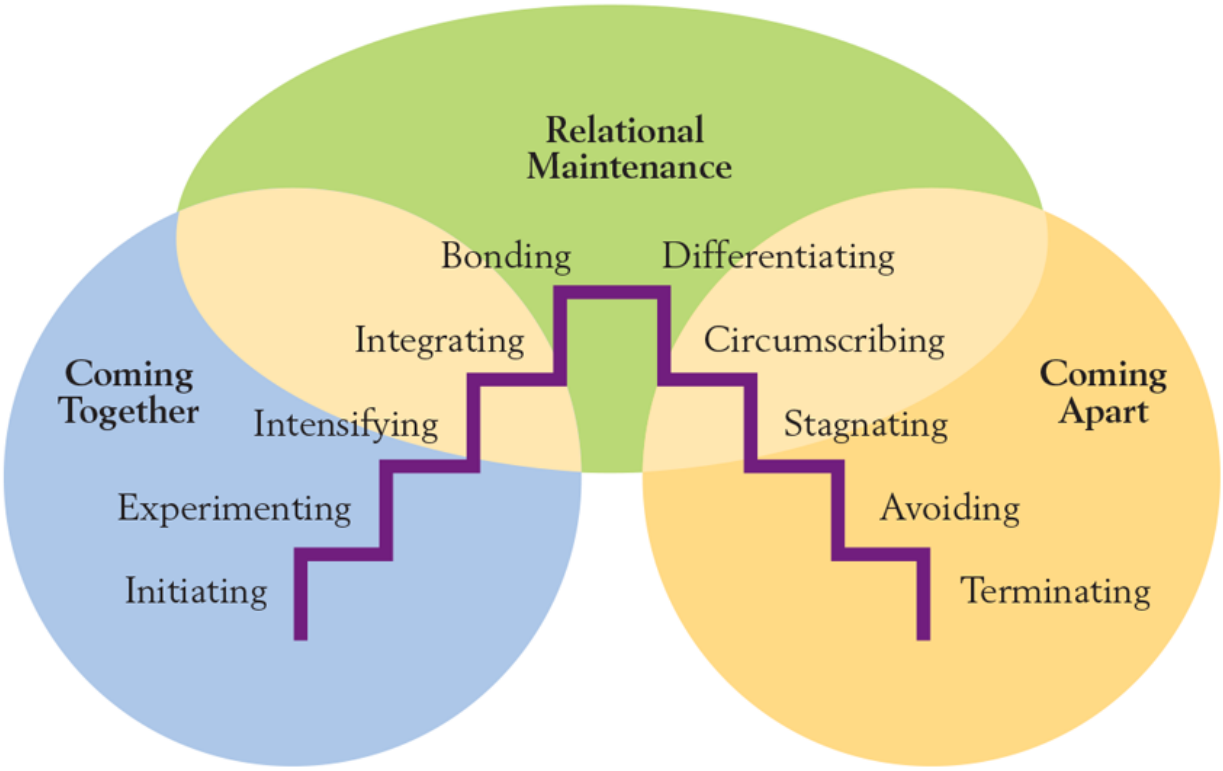
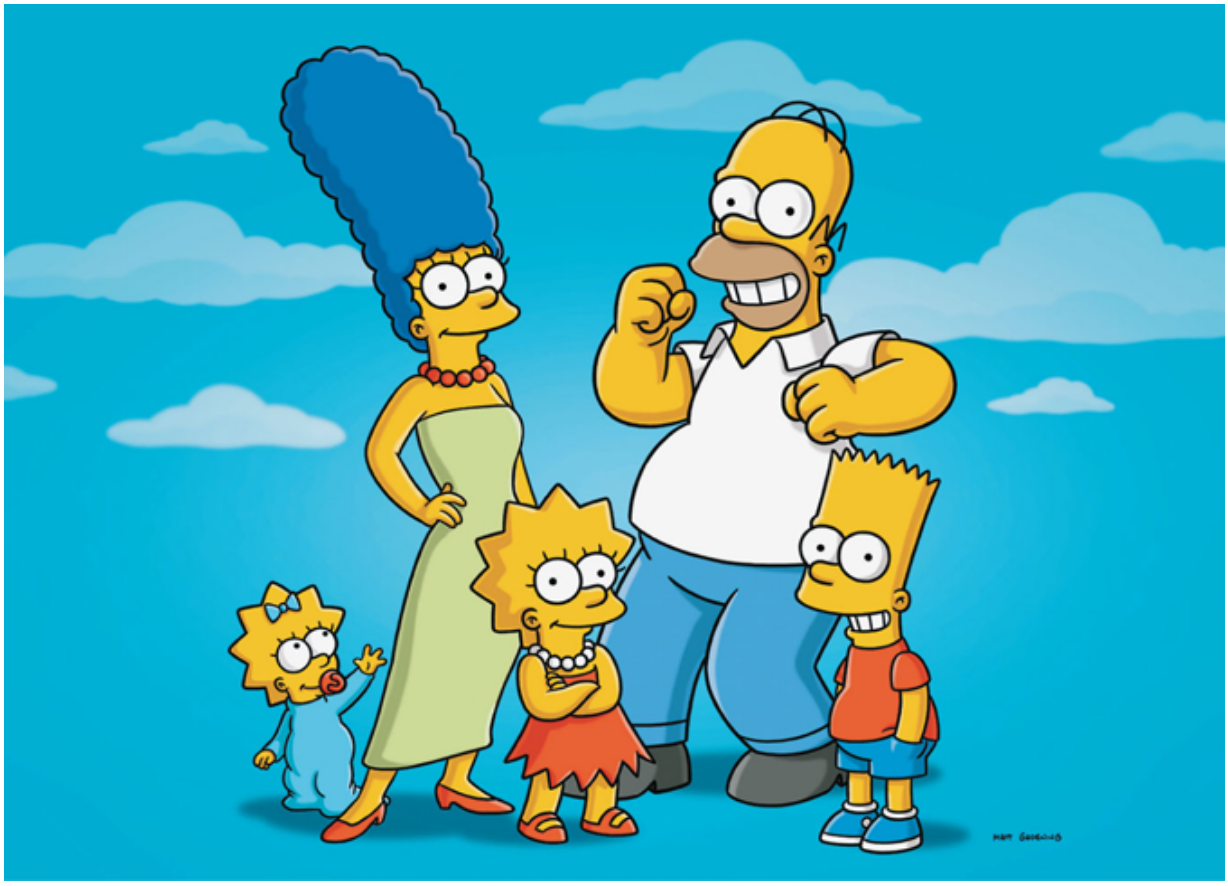


FIGURE 10.1 Stages of Relationship Development Adapted from Knapp, M. L., Vangelisti, A. L., & Caughlin, J. P. (2020). Interpersonal communication and human relationships (8th ed.). Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt. Back to text

11 Communication in Close Relationships: Friends, Family, and Romantic Partners

In the TV series *Stranger Things*, friends communicate their loyalty and support for one another in a variety of ways, including maintaining confidences, lending a hand, standing up for each other, and even apologizing and forgiving. ***What long-running friendships do you have, and how were those friendships forged?*** Back to text

Some notions of family extend beyond the usual definitions. Thanks to a misaddressed text message, Jamal Hinton is now considered a welcome member of the Dench family. ***Who do you consider members of your extended family?*** Back to text



Consider the stereotypical family roles in the long-running TV series *The Simpsons*: the oafish father, the kindly mother, the mischievous son, the responsible daughter. ***How would you characterize their communication rituals, rules, and patterns?*** Back to text

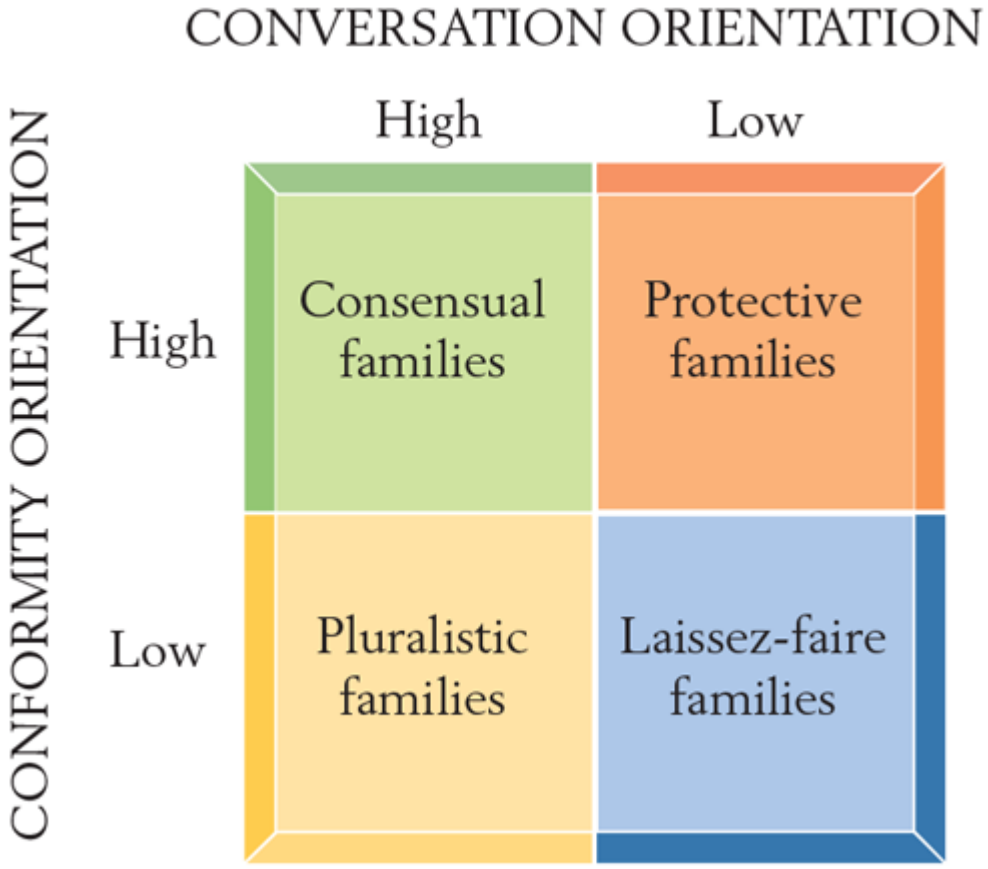


FIGURE 11.1 Family Communication Patterns Back to text

In the Oscar-winning movie *CODA* (which stands for Children of Deaf Adults), Ruby (Emilia Jones) feels a connection–autonomy tension between staying home to help with her family's business and leaving for college to pursue a music degree. ***Have you felt a similar tension between personal and family needs?*** Back to text

FIGURE 11.2 Family Boundary Patterns (Example: A parent asking adult child about college grades) Back to text

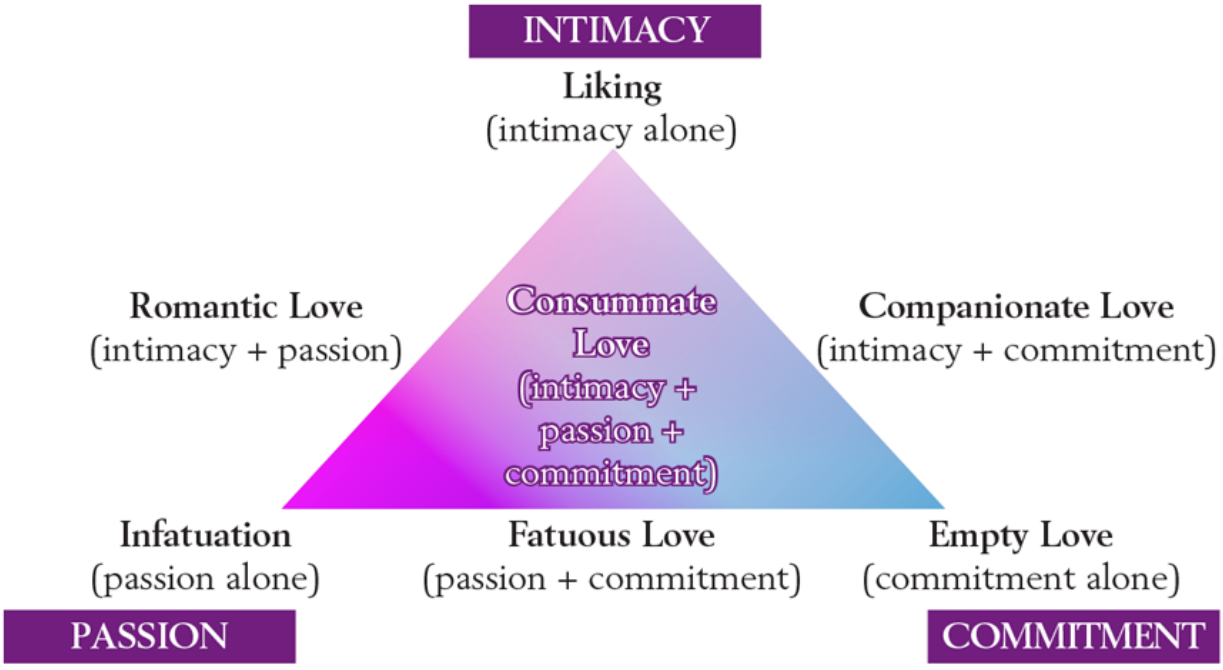


FIGURE 11.3 Components of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love Back to text

12 Managing Conflict

When the health of the Roy family patriarch begins to decline in the TV series *Succession*, conflict ensues among the siblings as they compete for control of his media conglomerate. While the resources they struggle over aren't scarce (unless you count vying for their father's attention), they're locked in an interdependent battle with incompatible goals. *Describe the sources and styles of conflict in your family*. Back to text

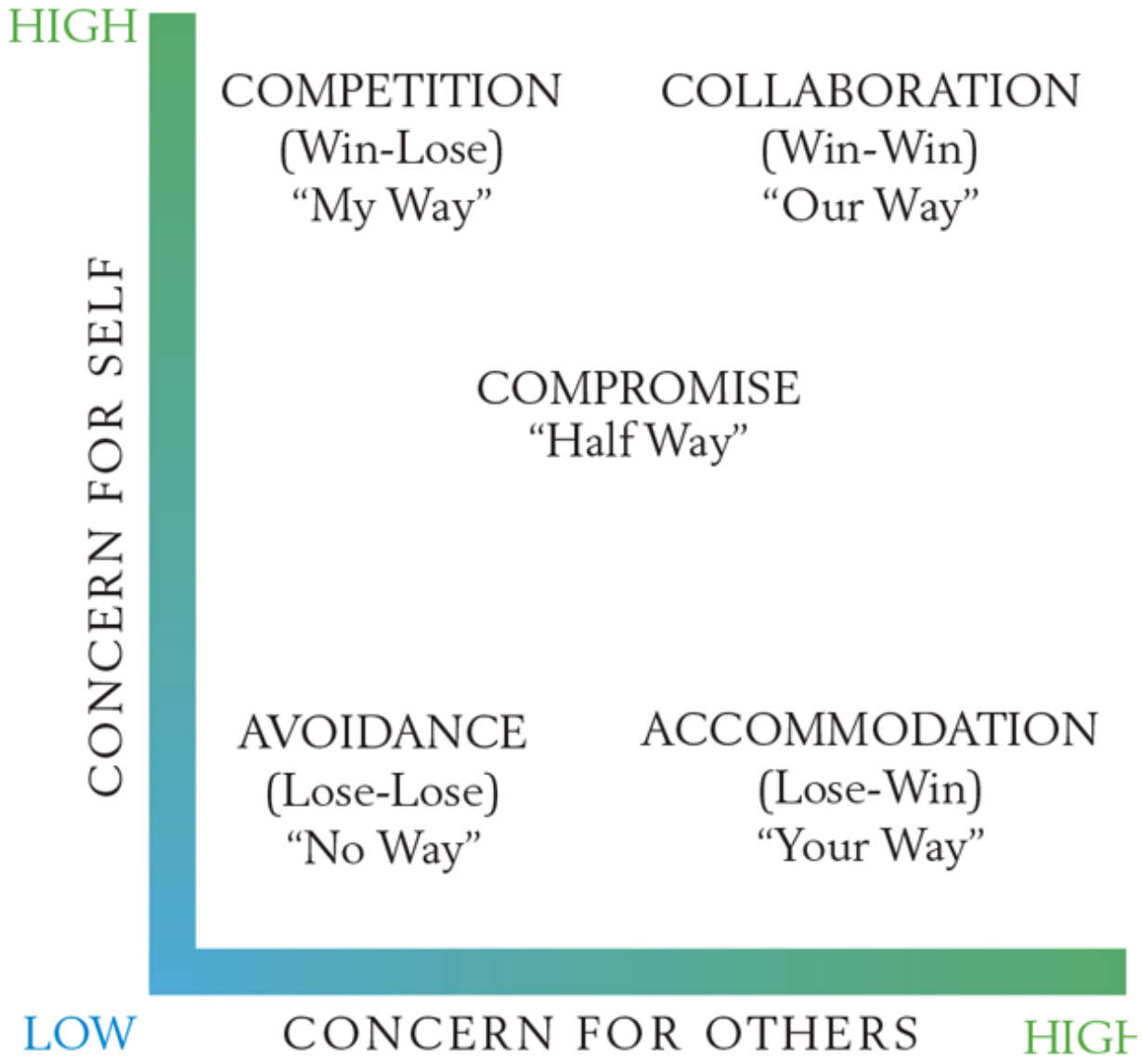


FIGURE 12.1 Conflict Styles Back to text

As portrayed in the musical *Hamilton*, the long-running feud between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton turned into a lethal escalatory spiral. ***What tactics can you use to keep an interpersonal conflict from raging out of control?*** Back to text

13 Communication Climate

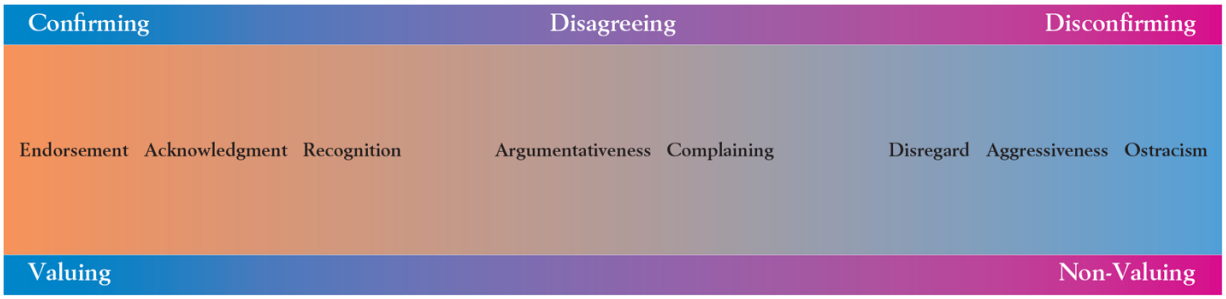


FIGURE 13.1 Message Types along the Confirmation–Disconfirmation Spectrum
Back to text

The film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* tells the story of Fred Rogers, a pioneer in children's television programming. Rogers (played by Tom Hanks) had an unwavering and powerful message: Everyone is valuable and deserving of love. ***Can you identify a TV figure or other celebrity who modeled confirming communication for you?*** Back to text

The TV series *Inventing Anna*, based on a true story, depicts how Anna Delvey (Julia Garner) regularly gets her way through aggressiveness and bullying—and as a result, ruins most of her interpersonal relationships. ***Explain how aggressiveness involves both winning and losing.*** Back to text